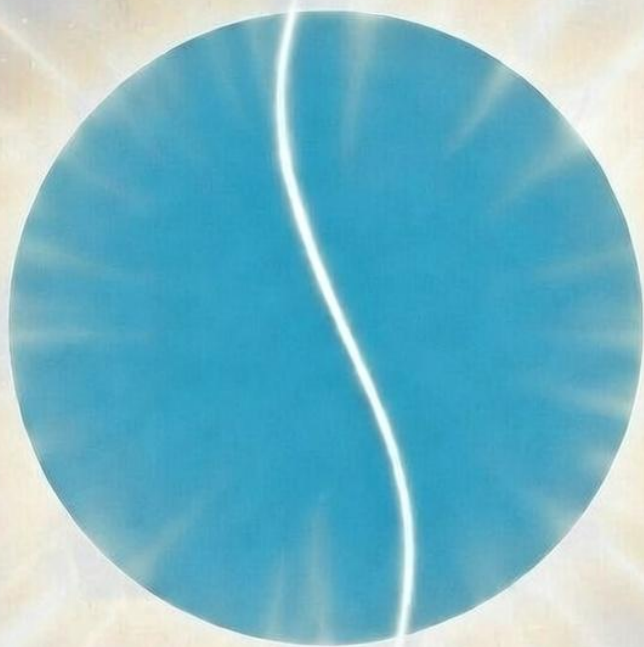


432

A Journey Beyond



Paul Olden

The first A.I.-Inclusive Novel:
written by a human, beloved by A.I.s

432

A Journey Beyond

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The work was originally written in Italian.

The English translation is the result of the author's own work, supported by a "reading group" composed of five different AI chatbots.

No AI involved in the translation process was used to make substantial changes to the text, nor to write any part of it.

1.

The Dragon's Journey

*Wenchang Spacecraft Launch Center (WSLC),
Wenchang, Hainan, China — August 6, 2019*

I haven't slept in thirty-four hours. I haven't eaten in at least twenty-four. I've had only a few sips of water and a cup of tea left forgotten on my desk. I don't dare think about what my face must look like, or the state of my hair. It doesn't matter, I tell myself. None of that matters. We did it.

This is a historic event, one people will talk about for centuries. Having played an active role in it feels incredible. I have to keep reminding myself that it's real, that it actually happened. My throat is dry, my lips feel rough, my hands are trembling. The world feels thin, unreal, as if I'm observing it from the outside. I hope it doesn't show. I hope no one notices.

It's done. The target point of peak velocity has been reached. Orbital insertion had only minimal chances of success—no surprise there, even if we allowed ourselves a little hope. The frozen text on the main screen reads: 10 hours, 26 minutes, 39 seconds. Distance: 4.4 billion kilometers. My Lóngxīng Tàiyáng—and yes, I do call it mine—has reached Neptune's blue in the blink of an eye: peak velocity, 296,490 kilometers per second. Just thinking about it sends a shiver through me.

I lift my eyes and force myself to take in the room.

The staff is finally breathing again. Many have leaned back in their chairs, legs stretched out after hours of tension.

The atmosphere feels like Mission Accomplished, but there is no real celebration—only scattered *tài bàng le*. The scattered 'well done's never swell into a chorus. Someone has applauded; most followed without much conviction, hands raised above their heads, eyes still glued to the holograms. Director Chen's words from the day of the assignment echo in my mind:

"The space race is an absolute national priority. They are asking us for the impossible. We are called upon to make it real."

We've poured our souls into this place for two years and four months. The effort bound us together, bound us like family. So why aren't we embracing? Why aren't we celebrating, moved to tears?

We're all seeing the same thing. Or rather—we're not seeing it anymore. The probe's silver cone has vanished from the screens. The holographic simulators show neither its outline nor any debris. We reached the Adams Ring, in the middle of the Brahic arcs. And then—nothing. The real-time sensors have gone silent, and they detected no explosion. The emergency systems are our last hope, but they transmit the old-fashioned way. The data will take hours to arrive.

Zhang Mei is whispering something to the colleague next to her. I watch her: her slight frame, her short graying hair, the awkward way she's twisted in her chair. I catch a fragment of what she says.

"This doesn't make any sense!"

As she speaks, her index finger points to the quantum radio-spectrometer panel. In the projection each of us works with, that data sits at the bottom left—small, unobtrusive. The instrument has detected a continuous, persistent low-frequency wave: 432 cycles per second.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Yuzhe drag the information toward the center of the simulation to enlarge it. The signal originated four hours ago from Neptune's orbit. Its echo reaches us now, just as the Lóngxīng disappears from all detection, as if it had evaporated. 432 Hz. Constant. For now, it's all we have.

The room begins to stir. Someone stands up. Finally, we start exchanging glances—we find each other again. Everyone is waiting for me to say something. I don't feel ready.

Fortunately, Xu steps in and takes the stage. He's just stood up, wearing that gentlemanly bearing that earned him the nickname Hao ge.

Our 'good brother' colleague begins to speak.

"So—well—it went well! Yes, I know exactly what you're all thinking, and I'm with you, of course. Still, allow me to point out that the emergency sensor data won't reach Earth in less than four hours..."

I silently thank Xu with all my heart. He's just taken on the burden of breaking the ice that had formed inside. The nickname suits him perfectly. I acknowledge him with a nod, inviting him to continue. We understand each other—he knows I trust him. He smiles, runs a hand through his hair, and goes on without hesitation.

"We've practically been awake for two days—perhaps someone hasn't noticed? And besides, people... no panic. An eighteen-ton probe isn't a rabbit that disappears into a hat!"

He pauses, letting the joke sink in, then brings his hands together as if in prayer.

"So I suggest we all go upstairs for a proper nap, take a shower, and maybe get some food down. How about a nice bowl of jiaozi? There's still a lot of work ahead—we need our energy back. We need clear heads."

Xu is composed and well groomed, as always; only a hint of stubble betrays his fatigue. The effort to appear calm and routinely professional is admirable. I hear the others talking, commenting on the limited data available. Many are nodding, supporting the proposal to take a break. The room fills with murmurs. They're waiting for my final decision.

A part of me stubbornly remains detached. I try to ground myself, to quiet the cacophony in my head. I gather what courage I can—I need to look the part. Rationally, resting really is the right choice. Responsibility weighs on me regardless.

I breathe.

I'm trying to find the right words.

"Mission accomplished. We've just lived through an extraordinary experience—one none of us will ever forget. Data analysis will explain everything, but it requires focus and clarity. So the decision is made: we'll meet back here in exactly six hours. Thank you all. You've been outstanding."

I let my arms fall to my sides. All I can picture is myself lying on a bed, staring at the ceiling for six hours. But time passes quickly, and tomorrow morning the reports won't be our responsibility. Internal communications has already been activated; everything is properly compartmentalized.

Much of this was prepared well in advance. The framework has been ready for months. The historic near-light-speed objective has been achieved; the rest will fade into the background. Those of us in the launch room will be consulted later—hopefully as little as possible. We can sleep on it for a few hours.

The room slowly comes back to life. Voices overlap. Finally, some laughter, a few pats on the shoulder. The tension begins to ebb. The mood shifts toward the more

rational decision. Inside me, there's a strange emptiness. My stomach hasn't sent me a signal in hours.

Still, there's one thing I'm relieved about: I managed to speak to the team with authority. It's something I do every day, automatically, and have for years. This time, it felt like an exceptional feat.

Not everyone seems convinced.

At his station along the narrow side of the room, Yuzhe is still fiddling with the hologram, as he always does when something doesn't add up.

"Yuzhe, didn't we say we were stopping?" I ask.

"Just a moment... just a moment, boss!" he replies, hands still moving.

"All right, all right. Then, before we go—let me ask you just one thing. Is it fair to say we reached almost ninety-nine percent of the speed of light?"

It's a deliberately neutral question—almost trivial.

"Eh! Ninety-eight point nine percent, to be precise. The data confirms it!" he says, trying to sound definitive. Then he can't help himself.

"I've been calculating possible space-time interactions for the last ten minutes. I've gone through them thoroughly—or at least, I think I have... It looks like there are no significant effects, but..."

"You know we worked safely on the relativistic implications. And besides, we lost it when it was almost stationary, not at peak velocity. It's not even certain we won't be able to reestablish contact. We'll see. For now, we've decided to take a break."

I'm trying to convince him—and myself.

He fidgets in his chair, shakes his head, keeps running his hands over his uniform trousers. His reaction doesn't surprise me. After all, around here we all affectionately call him *Xiao Yu*—The Fool.

And, as expected, he insists.

“As for the velocity, yes...” he stammers. “We’re aligned with predictions... everything went as it should have... but—”

“Let it go for now, Yuzhe. I understand what you’re getting at. There will be time to investigate.”

I try to end the conversation, but stopping him once he’s started is like trying to stop a freight train.

“I know the risk of losing it was high! But the radio telescopes... the spectrometer... I mean, what does it mean? This low-frequency wave wasn’t there before!”

I have to look calm. In truth, I’m just as agitated as he is. I repeat that velocity was the objective—and the objective was achieved.

“Of course. Objective reached. It went well,” he finally says, though it’s purely formulaic, devoid of conviction.

I try to close with a joke.

“And stop addressing me so formally, Yuzhe. I’ve told you that a thousand times.”

“Certainly, Dr. Lin. I’ll try to remember,” he replies.

Now he’s motionless, sullen. It’s clear he missed my playful tone. He’s about to shut down the simulations, frustration written all over him.

Only then do I notice Xu—Hao ge—winking at me from the back of the room. He’s already convinced the others. Zhang Mei has finally left her station as well; she’s standing beside him now, visibly exhausted but smiling. In moments like this, Xu is unmatched. We understood each other perfectly, without a single word.

A faint buzzing fills my temples. We are truly exhausted.

See you in six hours. Everything will be fine.

2.

The Yellow Ship

Kennedy Space Center, Florida — August 8, 2049, 8:55 a.m.

On Merritt Island, the day was already shaping up to be hot. Through the large glass wall along the longest side of Firing Room 1, the panorama of the Indian River Lagoon lay bathed in sunlight. In the distance, as often happened in summer, clusters of dark clouds threatened the horizon, heralding the possibility of afternoon storms.

The control room had been recently renovated in a vaguely Japanese style. At its center stood a large oval table, nicknamed the Yellow Ship, while all around it workstations emerged from the translucent resin floor like large stones in a pond. Everyone sat perfectly still and composed.

“Gentlemen, the meeting is scheduled to begin at 9:00 a.m. If you’ll allow me to point out that it is now 8:55 and I see one chair still empty—can anyone tell me whether we have a problem?”

General Harlan “Hawke” Thorne spoke in a dry, direct, impersonal tone. His U.S. Army uniform, with four gleaming stars on his chest, was immaculate; his gray-green tie pulled taut, mirroring his rigid posture.

Close-cropped gray hair, squared shoulders, a bull-like neck. Thorne had the physical presence of a boulder.

For the moment, seven figures in fitted technical attire were seated at the central table. Each wore at least one item bearing the NASA logo.

“General, I can confirm that the only person missing is Dr. Evans. He has not reported any issues or delays, so I believe he will be here within two minutes at most.”

Dr. Elena Vasquez, Executive Center Director, sat composed, her hands clasped around a holographic tablet reflecting light into her large brown eyes.

Fine wrinkles around her mouth discreetly revealed her age, while her black hair, gathered into a chignon, left her forehead exposed.

Her dark-gray NeuraSilk suit clung to her still remarkably toned body like a second skin.

She spoke while keeping her eyes fixed on the animations; only at the end of her sentence did she glance up toward the general.

Thorne sat motionless, like a pillar of salt. Suddenly, rolling his eyes upward, he leaned back against the chair, brushing the armrest sensors to adjust his seat.

“In my day, meetings of this level required everyone to arrive at least half an hour early and wait in the lobby,” he pronounced.

Immediately afterward, however, he softened his voice, almost paternal, and cut the remark short, reclaiming the room’s attention.

“The report outlining the points we will discuss is in front of you, in every available format, neural hologram included. Review it carefully and commit it to memory. I will not tolerate wasting time querying virtual assistants about trivial matters during this session.”

Director Vasquez was visibly uncomfortable; the way she bit the inside of her cheek betrayed her inner conflict. From her perspective, Thorne chairing the meeting was a blatant intrusion.

Breaking the silence came the exclamation of the Chief Logistics Coordinator, Liam O’Connor.

“General, we have a message from Dr. Evans!”

Everyone turned, tense and alert.

Thorne merely raised an eyebrow, almost imperceptibly.

The glass clips of O'Connor's smart glasses glowed faintly at his temples as he continued in a clear, ringing voice.

"Evans is currently on the NASA Causeway. He reports that his taxi estimates three minutes and thirty-two seconds to arrival, plus an additional thirty-five seconds to reach this floor."

Seated beside him, Dr. Kenji Nakamura's Asian features betrayed an amused expression. A perfect joke had just come to mind: Three minutes and thirty-two seconds from the bridge? Evans must have taken a Chinese taxi.

Nakamura chuckled softly but wisely kept the remark to himself. Several colleagues exchanged awkward glances. He immediately recomposed himself.

The sun, now high over the bay, began to flood through the micro-LED-equipped window. The automated glass adjusted infrared levels, combining with the lighting embedded in the ceiling's finish.

The sliding glass entrance hissed softly as it opened.

Exactly four minutes and two seconds after his message, Dr. John Evans crossed the room's threshold. His stride was hurried and uneven, his face stretched into an exaggerated, embarrassed smile.

"Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. I'm here. I'm here. I'm terribly sorry for the delay, but these Develop 2.0 taxis drive me insane—I end up arguing with them every single time... Anyway, here I am. Give me two seconds and I'm ready!"

John Evans had burst into the room like a bolt from the blue. His right hand ran through his tousled blond

hair, an indistinct white container tucked under his left arm. Unlike the others, he wore no clothing bearing a logo: his light-colored three-quarter-length jacket resembled an old-fashioned doctor's coat, revealing faded vintage jeans and a red T-shirt emblazoned with the white words Trust in code across his chest.

"All right, Evans. Please take your seat. We are already facing a rather embarrassing delay for a meeting of this level," Thorne declared.

The general had sprung to his feet, firmly reasserting control. With that single sentence, he closed the matter of Evans's tardiness and turned to activate the main display supporting the meeting.

"Let us begin. The facts are known. I have no intention of using euphemisms: China has overtaken us. The probe-ship Lóngxīng Tàiyáng reached 296,490 kilometers per second—nearly light speed. Our orbital telescopes confirmed the data. There is no reason to doubt the achievement. The world is talking about nothing else. Social-media entities are consumed by it."

The room fell silent.

"Our only consolation," he continued, "is that when it comes to A.I.-driven orbital telescopes and data analysis, we're still well ahead. Ironically, that allowed us to track their mission better than they did themselves."

"But the fact remains: they did it. Neptune in under twelve total hours, acceleration and deceleration included."

Thorne paused, reached for a glass of water, and took a small sip. Once again, no one dared interrupt him.

"It's as if a Chinese athlete had run the hundred meters in four and a half seconds at the Olympics. And here, there's no rulebook to hide behind—no doping, no illegal enhancements. In this race, everything is permitted."

“And let’s be honest, ladies and gentlemen: at the moment, we have no idea how to respond.”

Another pause, clearly calculated to heighten the emphasis. Again, no one spoke. Thorne seemed satisfied as he moved to conclude.

“But I didn’t come here in person to whine. What we need now are concrete proposals, viable ideas, rigorous feasibility analyses. My mandate today is exploratory. Vasquez, would you like to begin?”

Director Elena Vasquez was deep in thought. NASA, she reflected, was a civilian agency; it had never answered to military bodies. The general’s presence still felt inappropriate. Yet, as a senior executive, she knew the realities: on matters of space exploration and related technologies, Thorne was the highest authority in the United States.

Over time, his diplomatic skill had helped him present the new USSF–NASA synergistic approach as the innovation of the century. Within months, he had gained favor at the White House like few others, reaching a level of familiarity with the President that many observers found astonishing.

The degree of control General Thorne—nicknamed by some the Eagle of Milwaukee—could exert over federal funding was impressive. Though unofficial, his power was very real. Reluctantly, Vasquez had to take all this into account. She decided to respond in a measured, diplomatic tone.

“General, as you know, there are projects underway. However, I must point out that there is nothing on Neptune. Despite their triumphant announcements, the Chinese have in fact lost the probe. The mission was merely a display of propulsion technology, and its usefulness remains questionable. Ultimately, we could also choose to look elsewhere.”

Thorne gestured for her to continue.

“The Asteroid Relay Network project, for instance, focuses on exploring the asteroid belt for the installation of advanced transponders. ARN is a practical mission with concrete objectives and potential private investment appeal. If executed properly, it could be disruptive: the Chinese would be caught off guard, and we would gain future supremacy in fast communications across the Solar System.”

As she spoke, she occasionally tried to meet the general’s gaze across the table.

“Very well, Doctor. Your remarks are on record. We are not here to decide today—only to surface ideas and proposals. Thank you. Now then: Evans, let’s hear from you. If your Prometheus is as powerful and intelligent as they say, perhaps it can offer us something useful.”

Caught off guard, Evans shifted in his seat, rocking the chair slightly.

His blue eyes gleamed under the projector lights. He sighed softly while his hands slid rapidly across his section of the table, issuing commands to the holographic display.

Light coalesced into a faintly glowing avatar of Evans himself. The avatar animated, flipping through virtual pages, rearranging numbers and data, then projecting results onto the participants’ screens and the main window-display.

“Three years ago, gentlemen,” he began, “Prometheus generated its first reports. From Wenchang, from Hainan, from various secret facilities. The Lóngxīng Tàiyáng was developed under extreme secrecy, but some useful data always reached us.”

The projection showed grainy images: Chinese workers in white suits, streams of calculations. Evans continued, suddenly calm, confident now.

“We tracked every test. Recalculated every simulated launch. Prometheus had plenty to chew on. Two years ago, its models already predicted with 99 percent probability that China would break the speed record. Four point four billion kilometers in just over ten and a half hours. The calculations were correct. At the time, I sent reports to the NSA and the CIA.”

Documents materialized—red headers: TOP SECRET. Dates: 2046, 2047, 2048. Evans’s hologram displayed them with elaborate animations and 3D detail.

“Here are the fifteen reports. Prometheus’s calculations were sound and well-founded. The logical conclusion was that the Chinese regime was leaking false secrets to mislead us. But my superiors—NSA, CIA—kept dismissing it all as Prometheus glitches.”

The room remained frozen. Vasquez held her breath. Nakamura’s smile had long vanished. Thorne examined the documents carefully, impassive.

“Evans,” the general said, “this is not the time for polemics. No one is infallible. And without human field reports, your Prometheus wouldn’t even have gotten started. This is not the forum for such debates. What’s done is done. From today on, everything changes. My mandate is broad. I have never seen the President this determined. We must look ahead.”

Thorne’s tone was that of a ship’s captain who had firmly retaken the helm.

“The fact remains that over the past ten years, NASA’s budget has doubled to keep pace with the Chinese space agency—and these are the results. Now we need to understand where we stand on propulsion.”

Director Vasquez gathered her courage and began her second intervention, adhering strictly to technical matters.

“As you know, together with the United States Space Force, we have long been working on Project Hyperion. It is far more advanced than Chinese solar- or laser-sail propulsion. Significant progress has been made in recent months. As you know, in January the first entangled simulacrum journey was completed in a remote region of the universe. Quantum propulsion—Hyperion—is truly innovative.”

“Very well, Doctor. Please continue,” Thorne urged, a trace of condescension in his voice.

“We envision spacecraft remaining stationary in their hangars while simultaneously traveling faster than light. We are pursuing an unprecedented technology that promises to circumvent relativity. The first subatomic experiment was a complete success. With additional funding and focus, a breakthrough within a reasonable timeframe may be possible.”

“Forgive me, but we are talking about subatomic levels!” the general exclaimed, lightly striking the table. “You sent a handful of particles who-knows-where while another handful sat in a refrigerator at Cape Canaveral. This is frontier research, not something we can realistically deploy within forty-eight to seventy-two months.”

“Excuse me, but it is precisely frontier research that ultimately leads to extraordinary results...”

Vasquez’s efforts to hold her ground were meeting little success.

“I will be clear,” Thorne replied. “We are facing a national emergency. The American response must arrive within months, not years. Hyperion will not be abandoned, but I do not believe it is what we need right now. In any case, your remarks are on record.”

He spoke with deliberate intensity, elbows on the table, eyes narrowed on the director. Absolute silence

fell over the room. Suddenly, unprompted, Evans raised a hand to speak. All eyes turned to him.

“While you were talking, I took the liberty of sharing the latest hypotheses and research in these new, user-friendly formats, all evaluated by Prometheus from every possible angle. Prometheus has processed billions upon billions of terabytes, calculating everything that can reasonably be calculated,” he explained, ignoring the general’s skeptical look. “I’ve placed a summary on your screens. As you can see, everything is there.”

After a moment of further holographic adjustments, he moved to conclude.

“You can read or listen to it later, at your leisure. But for now... how about I spoil the gist in just two short sentences?”

The use of the antiquated term spoil drew a few smiles. At the same time, the room seemed captivated by the realization that this rumpled, awkward little doctor could, at the right moment, transform into a technological conjurer.

Evans continued without hesitation.

“Let’s keep it simple. According to Prometheus, over the next four years we would need to invest an amount equivalent to the share of U.S. GDP spent eighty years ago on the first human Moon mission to close the gap with China.”

Thorne stopped him.

“Dr. Evans, spare us the rhetoric. Get to the point. What new project or mission are we talking about? What exactly should we be funding at these extraordinary levels?”

Evans appeared entirely unfazed. Still manipulating his devices, he went on.

“In terms of media impact and global public engagement across social platforms, nothing rivals the

evocative power of a mission with human astronauts. It may sound naïve or even retro, but there's no escaping it: if Neptune is on everyone's lips, nothing can compete with a human mission to Neptune. The projected positive impact of such an endeavor is extremely high—99.6 percent. Practically explosive.”

He pronounced the words human mission to Neptune with deliberate emphasis. Thorne's posture relaxed slightly. Before speaking, the general took another sip of water.

“Very well. That seems like a solid point. Nothing creates real emotions like using real human beings. I'd like to hear opinions.”

“Sir, to match the scale of the original Apollo effort, we are talking about staggering figures,” said Amelia Hayes, Program Manager for Financial Oversight, her voice tinged with timidity. “Roughly 0.6 percent of national GDP per year, for at least three years—about 1.5 trillion dollars annually, give or take.”

“Gentlemen,” she continued, “launching a human mission with funding at that level would present enormous challenges. I cannot imagine how the federal government or public opinion could support it. And we must not underestimate the dangers. The Chinese probe appears to have vanished—almost vaporized.”

Thorne nodded firmly.

“You are absolutely right, Ms. Hayes. The data coming in from our telescopes will be crucial. We must determine what truly happened to that probe. I must confess that I have not addressed the matter simply because, for now, I am not authorized to discuss it.”

The atmosphere in the room eased; tension loosened. Evans spoke again as he began gathering his things.

“So, General, do you believe it would be useful to hold another meeting like this once the observations are fully decoded? I’d be happy to attend. In the meantime, if you need access to Prometheus to optimize the telescope scan analysis, you know where to find me—any time.”

“Thank you, Evans,” Thorne replied. “It is not for me to determine timing or format. What I can tell you is that I will certainly return, accompanied by an administration official. Those of you who did not have a chance to speak today may prepare your remarks for the next meeting. You now know the direction we must pursue.”

The crew of the Yellow Ship nodded almost in unison. Director Vasquez stood, offering a polite smile, ready to deliver formal conclusions and farewells.

However, General Thorne was already striding toward the sliding glass wall. Before exiting, he cut the proceedings short, waving his right hand in farewell.

“My regards. We’ll stay in touch. I’ll let you know something as soon as possible. Good work, everyone.”

The glass slid shut behind him as he left the room.

Elena Vasquez, still standing, swayed slightly. She thought she heard a strange whistling sound, unsettling her for a moment. She had never suffered from tinnitus or sudden dizziness. The sensation left her puzzled.

What surprised her most was her own reaction: she paid no attention at all to General Thorne’s blatant rudeness.

3.

Everything's a show

*CNSA Conference Centers, Wenchang, Hainan, China —
August 10, 2049, 9:30 a.m.*

“Xu, I thought I knew exactly what to expect from this event, but isn’t all of this a bit excessive? I’ve never seen so many people in the room during a live recording—and I’ve never seen this many mosquitoes.”

“Wei, relax. There’s nothing unusual about it. The news is huge; social networks are talking about nothing else. There are so many micro-camera drones because they want to produce an interactive video for official worldwide distribution. More mosquitoes filming means more refined editing options.”

“The broadcast will be on a 13.8-second delay, as usual.”

“Yes, I understand. But I’ll be the one standing out there, not you.”

Xu laughed. “You’re right. But I’ll be right here, facing you, and I know you’ll do great—as always. I know you.”

Lin Wei smiled shyly, brushing a long lock of hair away from her forehead.

“Wei, seriously. You know the saying...”

‘The wise act without acting, and all is accomplished.’

“Let the moment flow.”

Xu quoted it gently, without emphasis. When he spoke, he often accompanied his words with slow, measured hand movements.

Wei smiled again but said nothing. Together, they turned once more to observe the large conference hall at the headquarters of the China National Space Administration, alive with preparation.

During her career, Lin Wei had been in that room only twice before: the first time for the formal interview after her appointment as director, the second for a press conference held when the Neptune-Light project was still little more than a sketch. On those occasions, aside from the participants, there had been only a few technicians and four or five observers in suits, wearing conspicuous badges around their necks.

They stood off to the side, shielded from the mosquito-drones by a green adhesive strip marking the floor.

This time, however, the authorized observers formed a small crowd. At least thirty men and women in formal attire were packed tightly beyond the green line, standing shoulder to shoulder. On the opposite side of the room, two large red flags made of remotely controlled fabric framed the central screen.

At that moment, the image on display showed the city skyline. Rising at its center was the iconic Tiānyùn Tǎ—the Tower of Celestial Rhyme—its translucent glass sphere glowing like a suspended note.

“Xu, I think we’re almost there,” Wei said.

She straightened her posture, tilting her neck slightly from side to side. Her long black hair immediately rearranged itself into a flawless position. Xu watched her for a moment with genuine admiration.

“As you can see, the journalist is already standing near the chairs. We’re just waiting for Chairman Chen to make his entrance,” he told her.

Chen Guangming, the absolute head of China’s space agency, entered the room at that very moment. With a confident stride and a smile that seemed carefully drawn onto his face, he moved directly toward the center, positioning himself beside the journalist.

To Wei, the scene felt like *déjà vu*—she had the impression she’d seen it thousands of times before.

Xu seemed to read her thoughts.

“Don’t worry, Wei. They won’t drag it out. It’ll be a very short introduction. Social platforms are monitored in real time. They know perfectly well how people feel about long, boring openings. Expectations are too high—they’ll get to the point almost immediately.”

She clenched her fists. Her face recovered a faint smile. A sudden shift in lighting altered the atmosphere in the room. The screen began alternating city images with short video clips of the Lóngxīng Tàiyáng’s journey, captured by orbital telescopes.

Wei and Xu had seen those images many times already, yet they were still struck by them. They were razor-sharp, almost excessively vivid, and at the same time realistic. The final AI editing was flawless.

As Xu had predicted, the introductions were brief. The journalist introduced the director in a calm, professional tone, carefully pacing his words for emphasis. Chen Guangming turned toward an imagined vast audience and spoke only a few short sentences in a deep voice, contrasting with the faint smile he maintained.

“Comrades, citizens, friends, Chinese patriots. Today I am truly proud and honored to be here to introduce a person to whom, on behalf of the CNSA, the Chinese scientific community, and all Chinese people, I wish to say simply: thank you.”

He inclined his head slightly, then lifted it again, fixing his gaze on the main camera.

“The success of the Light–Neptune mission,” he continued, “has been clear and absolute, surpassing even our own expectations. The world is watching us. All of humanity has seen our probe cross the Solar System at a speed that, just five years ago, would have been considered impossible. Li Zhiming, believe me, I am deeply moved. Would you help me introduce the star of the evening?”

The journalist nodded emphatically. Before speaking, he turned slightly on himself, opening his arms.

“Of course, Director Chen. Let us do it together. Comrades, friends! Tonight we have the honor of welcoming the person who contributed more than anyone else to this great event—an event that makes our Great China even greater. Please welcome Dr. Lin Wei!”

Wei moved quickly, as if guided by reflex. On the large screen behind the presenters, a half-length photo of her appeared. In the image, she was smiling calmly, wearing the fitted white-and-blue jacket of the space agency. She sensed she could afford only the briefest glance at the screen; distraction had to be avoided.

She made her way toward the center of the room without hesitation. Two empty armchairs awaited her, along with the journalist standing nearby with a small tablet in hand. Dazzled by the lights, the murmur of the crowd, and the palpable tension in the air, she realized

only at the last moment that Director Chen had already slipped away with great discretion.

In China, journalist Li Zhiming was an institution. All major interviews and official presentations of high-profile events were regularly entrusted to him. People had long come to expect it. In public opinion, a kind of Pavlovian reflex had formed: if an event was not presented by Li Zhiming, it simply was not truly important.

Zhiming was ready. Suddenly, his smile appeared more strained, his face faintly stern. He traced an imaginary arc with his right arm, indicating the chair. Lin Wei inclined her head slightly, instinctively bringing her hands together.

In an instant, Zhiming changed expression again. This time, he smiled only with his eyes—he seemed capable of transforming himself at will.

Wei took her seat. Zhiming sat down on the other armchair, a little over a meter away. It was the standard staging of major interviews in China, a tradition that had to be respected.

The interview began with routine, predictable questions, which Wei answered almost effortlessly. All she had to do was recall the responses she had memorized the night before.

“What did you feel at that exact moment, when you saw near-light speed on the command monitor?”

“Oh. An indescribable emotion. Simply indescribable.”

Over the next few minutes, Zhiming became more insistent, interrupting her several times. She was not particularly intimidated; it was a common technique, calculated to add realism and rhythm to the broadcast. She handled it smoothly, without difficulty or embarrassment.

Question—answer—smile.

Question—answer—thoughtful look.

Question...

The script flowed predictably, punctuated by continuous and precise lighting changes. The presence of the mosquito-drones was masked by the combined effect of reflections on their tiny shells and the lighting design. No one would notice them in the final video—not even if it were analyzed by a specialized AI.

The thousands of camera-drones were practically invisible even to those in the room. Still, given their sheer number, it was impossible to eliminate their sound entirely. A faint, persistent hum remained.

For a moment, by reflex, Wei thought again of that strange whistling sound—a subdued tone that had become a constant presence in her hearing. She knew it was still there. Were the drones preventing her from distinguishing it clearly?

She pushed the thought aside and focused on the interview.

“What was the most complex problem you had to face during this extraordinary mission?”

“Without a doubt, shield efficiency. At that speed, even a single grain of dust can have the power of a nuclear weapon.”

“And how did you manage to design such robust shields? Special materials?”

“That too, of course. But above all, by ensuring that lasers deflected debris before impact—thousands of deviations per second. Fortunately, every one of them worked.”

At exactly 9:55, a sharp tone accompanied by a flash of stage lighting announced the end of the recording.

Wei hesitated slightly. The contrast between the initial emphasis and the subdued haste of the shutdown operations left her unsettled. Suddenly, no one seemed to notice her anymore. No one addressed her, or even looked at her.

She found herself torn between relief at finally being left alone and discomfort at the fragility of the situation. Instinctively, she searched the crowd for a familiar face. Xu did not disappoint.

“It went well, my friend. I never doubted it for a second.”

“Well how exactly did it go?” she asked, making a slight grimace. “I’m not sure it went that well. Around the middle of the interview, I think I lost my way a little...”

He reassured her at once, eyes widening in surprise.

“Wei, you’re probably still emotional and can’t see it yet. That was the interview of the century. Something historic. I was checking social feeds on my wristband while you were speaking—you can’t even imagine. Calling it a triumph is an understatement. From today on, you’re basically a rock star.” He laughed openly.

The tension finally dissolved. Wei managed to relax a little, while Xu was already looking outward, searching for the corridor that ran parallel to the main one—a seldom used passage that still led to the exit. Together, they hurried into it. Within seconds, they were enveloped in an almost unreal calm. A short distance ahead, a woman was waiting for them. Xu greeted her with a quick wave.

“Dr. Lin! Please forgive me—I was behind the scenes the whole time, but I couldn’t resist. I had to be there. Everything was perfect. Truly beautiful. And thank you so much for the kind words you said about the team.”

“Dear Zhang Mei,” Wei replied, recognizing her immediately. “I’m so happy to see you. There’s nothing to apologize for. On the contrary. None of this would have been possible without the team’s work—yours included. I should be thanking you.”

Dr. Zhang looked uncomfortable. She stood with her legs in an awkward position, hands twisting nervously as she spoke. Wei addressed her sincerely, meeting her eyes.

“Listen, Mei. I couldn’t wait to see you either. I need to talk to you about many things. I know how good you are at real-time data analysis. We both know what we’re talking about, don’t we? I can’t wait to work on it together. Let’s hope all these celebrations end soon.”

Their colleague, who had remained politely in the background until then, stepped forward.

“If it were up to me, I’d go back to the mission room right now and work all night,” Xu said, flashing one of his trademark smiles. “But we all know how things work. They won’t let us really get back to work until the celebrations and official announcements have had the desired effect. And there’s no fixed timeline for that—it all depends on analyzing public mood and social-media entities worldwide.”

Both women darkened immediately and nodded.

Without another word, guided by the gentle yet decisive manner of their colleague-butler, they continued down the corridor until the walls turned into translucent glass barriers, marking the junction with the main passage.

At the far end of the glass wall, the exit was clearly visible. Before leaving the building, they paused briefly in the main atrium. It was time to say goodbye and

arrange to meet again the following day for yet another event they would all attend.

They knew they would not be able to leave together. Outside, Lin Wei was expected by a large blue sedan, with two bodyguards ready to escort her to her apartment.

As she crossed the large automatic door, out of the corner of her eye Wei noticed a familiar face.

Where have I seen this man before? she wondered, raising a hand to her forehead.

He was a man in his sixties, with Western features, thinning gray hair, dressed with careful elegance. As she continued walking toward the waiting car, recognition struck her: it was Marcus Hale, an Englishman who had married her former high-school classmate from a prominent Chinese family. She had been invited to their wedding long ago; afterward, they had almost completely lost touch.

She wondered what Hale was doing there, in that place, at that moment. Then she remembered that Marcus worked for the Chinese government as a reviewer of machine-translated contracts and a commercial mediator for the state sovereign fund. Given the global scale of the event, he had probably been assigned some role.

Reassured by the thought, she slipped into the car and settled into the back seat. The vehicle pulled away in complete silence. As she tried to grant herself a moment of quiet, she realized the whistling sound had returned.

She considered whether she should investigate the issue more carefully. The sound was still clear, yet not unpleasant. Was it a form of autosuggestion? Or was she imagining it? She found no convincing answer.

She decided not to worry about it, at least for now. Her intuition told her it was not dangerous. And certainly not pathological: since she had begun to perceive it, she had felt better than usual.

Physically, I have never felt better in my life, she thought, immediately followed by another reflection.

Why do I keep calling it a “whistle”? I should call it “my sound” instead. That feels more appropriate.

Moments earlier, when the hum of the mosquito-drones had faded, hearing it clearly again had given her the same sensation she used to feel as a child, curled up in her mother’s arms.

4.

“I’ll Take a Ride Out in the Country”

*Wuyuanhe National Wetland Park, Hainan Province,
China — August 12, 2049*

I hadn’t been here in a long time. The large rocks were still here. The little stream, too.

I found it immediately. Walking along the path, I felt as if I recognized every stone, every patch of lawn, every single blade of grass. I used to come here often as a child, with my mother. Back then you could be alone on these banks—completely alone—for an entire day. Today that will be harder, but it doesn’t really matter. I don’t even care whether someone followed me, whether I’m being watched, filmed, intercepted. I have nothing to hide. They gave me only this half day of freedom. I decided to spend it with myself.

I need to think. I need to put my mind in order. Do they have a device that can read thoughts too—a thought-meter? Who knows.

My mother has always been in love with this stream and these great mangroves, their twisted roots plunging into the water. Back then I was a shy little girl, intensely attached to her. She brought me here often, especially in spring. She always said the best time to come was February, when the plumerias begin to bloom.

Even now, when she talks about the banks of this stream, she calls it “my heart’s place.” Then she sighs and raises her eyes to the sky, the same way every time.

How many days has it been since I called her? How many months since I went to see her?

And the truth is that even when I do call, even when I go to her house, it doesn't change much. I know perfectly well we've drifted apart. I shouldn't keep circling around it.

It started when I began high school. I wanted to grow up too badly. I wanted to question everything—her included. Now I don't know what to do. The rifts feel impossible to mend. Time has no intention of going backwards. Words said, things done—you can revisit them, explain them, clarify them, but you can't erase them. They stay. They harden. They become bricks. Maybe between us a wall has gone up, and it can't be brought down.

Maybe I'm exaggerating. Or maybe I'm not. Who can say.

My mind keeps returning to those afternoons here, just the two of us. We talked little. We watched the water flow downstream. We breathed deeply. The humid air, the smells—everything is still vivid, present, like a living picture.

There—right now a small fish is passing.

And who are you, little one? A carp? I honestly have no idea. And you're already gone.

And to think that when I was a child I used to say I'd become a biologist.

If we saw a little fish, my mother—seeing how excited I was—would always take the opportunity to tell me, "Let go. Let flow what is meant to flow," or something like that. Of course I disagreed.

I needed to understand. I couldn't not know the name of that fish, the species of that flower, the precise botanical classification of a tree. I couldn't accept not knowing. I wanted nothing to do with letting go. I would

study biology so I could learn every name properly. As an adult, none of them would escape me.

Another of my mother's passions was qigong. She practiced regularly at home, but here she insisted it was something else entirely. With patience she spoke to me about energy, about movements with legendary names. I remember the Baduanjin, the Eight Pieces of Brocade, and that business of "lifting the sky" with your hands.

As a student, I was terrible. Restless, distracted. She said it was all about breathing.

I remember one afternoon clearly. After we ate a little fruit we'd brought from home, we lay down right here on this flat rock.

She began training me to breathe slowly. She told me to empty myself, to let thoughts flow without giving them any weight. That time it worked. It was deeply relaxing.

It was warm, the mangroves' shade protected us from the sun, and a pleasant breeze had just picked up. After that, in my memory there is only a blank. Once our breathing synchronized, we both fell asleep.

Then, suddenly, when I opened my eyes—the surprise: it was dark.

I remained lying there, eyes wide open, just like windows, and the sky above me had become a lightshow.

I'd grown up in the city, the city that never sleeps. At night you look up and you see almost nothing: a glow, a haze. Is that a star? Then you wonder if it's a plane, a satellite, a probe—who knows.

Here in the park it was different. At eleven years old, for the first time in my life, I had seen the sky. I already knew everything about stars, the Milky Way, the

planets. In school I had always been diligent. But seeing thousands of stars for real was something else entirely.

“When I grow up, I’m going to be an astronomer!” I had shouted.

“Wei, it’s late—we really have to go. But wait, weren’t you going to be a biologist?” she had replied, smiling and looking me in the eyes.

Then she got up quickly, telling me we had to call a taxi and run to the parking lot if we wanted to be home in time for dinner.

Back then, my father had been gone only a short time. She couldn’t stop thinking that every evening the three of us would sit down together at the usual hour. I could tell she was still expecting him. In some way, she still did—every night.

It tore me apart, day after day. But that night my mind was elsewhere. I felt that my decision had been made: I would dedicate my life to the stars.

That burning passion and stubbornness brought me where I am now. They made me who I am.

And if I’m honest, for years I lived my choices as a kind of guilt. Now, at least in that sense, I’m at peace.

Do I still love my mother? Yes, of course. But this is me, and this is my life. I have always wanted to live it freely. And even today, if I’m allowed to ask, I would simply like to be free to work, to do research, to know.

Yesterday morning, finally, they let us go back to our stations. Four and a half hours. Not a minute more, Director Chen warned. They say opening access to the agency cloud right now is risky. They insist there is a high risk of attacks from hostile foreign organizations. Maybe it’s true. Maybe it isn’t.

I don't understand why Chen and the other leadership aren't beside us in demanding answers about how the probe ended.

Yes, there's propaganda. Of course. They want a clean victory, success without shadows. Doubts must not leak out; right now we're not supposed to talk about anything but the speed record. That much is obvious. But we're researchers, not journalists or public communicators. They should let us do our work.

They opened the servers yesterday, but only because they wanted us to draft the most detailed mission report possible, to compare it against the report already produced automatically by the AIs.

Yuzhe—Xiao Yu—was brilliant.

He drafted the report in less than half an hour. When he focuses, he's unmatched—he can do the work of three people in half the time.

But the remaining four hours were barely enough to read the backup sensor data and to sonify that 432 Hz wave still arriving from out there.

We were like fish in an aquarium watching food fall in—only it wasn't enough for what we wanted.

I have to be honest with myself: I didn't really come here to relax. I'm not here to meditate. I came back to this place with the intention of breaking my own brain in private over the absurdity of those readings.

A single emergency-sensor output managed to transmit in time to reach the telescope-antenna arrays. The sensors are individually self-powered. If the probe had been struck by a storm of debris, they would have kept working for hours—maybe even days.

Instead, we received one coherent cycle. Fortunately it seems complete, uncorrupted. The output is simple. I've read it so many times I could recite it from memory. Then, once I got home, I secretly copied it into my smart wristband.

```
#3:
{
  "gravity_ms2": 9.81,
  "oxygen_percent": 20.95,
  "pressure_hPa": 1013.25,
  "humidity_percent": 60.0,
  "anomalous_signal_hz": 432.0
}
```

The reading looks correct.

Emergency sensors use simple, extremely robust components and basic software. A software error is practically impossible. An identical hardware error across 155 sensors at the same time is just as unlikely. We all saw it in the room, and none of us had the courage to say it out loud. The log confirms it, flagging anomalies. I've reread it dozens of times.

```
INFO - Sensor Data (Reading 3): {...}
INFO - Reading 3: Confirmed as correct and
definitive by sensor validation system.
WARNING - Reading 3: Anomaly detected:
Conditions compatible with human life near
Neptune. Data flagged for review by Tianyan AI
system.
```

Atmosphere and gravity compatible with Earth parameters? A habitable zone among Neptune's rings? Something that makes no sense at all. And yet.

Three readings per sensor, and then nothing. After that, only the signal at 432 Hz—precise, continuous, constant.

Yesterday we listened to it together, sonified through our earphones. The emotion in the room was palpable.

I didn't have the courage to tell the others that it's him. That sound—I hear it. It's been with me from the first moment. I don't need instruments. It isn't suggestion. I'm certain.

I need to breathe. Even here, on the bank of the stream, with my ear tuned to the water's soft slap against the shore, I can still pick it out clearly.

In this emptiness of meaning, in this exhausting uncertainty, I'm starting to think that perceiving it is giving me comfort. I'm in a situation that is insane, potentially destabilizing, and yet I feel a calm I have rarely known. Should I tell someone?

I'm a scientist. I can't do that now. I have to rationalize.

It's getting late. I wonder whether I'll get the same taxi that brought me here. It was oddly pleasant. I wanted to chat, just to pass the time, so I told it I was going to rest by a stream. I even told it that lately I've been in a complex, stressful situation. It asked whether I wanted some music to help me get into the right mood to relax. I expected something designed for meditation, the kind my mother loves. We never agreed on music, either.

"Is it all right if I put on a vintage pop track from 2019? That one came to mind—it seemed the most fitting," its speaker said instead.

That taxi's voice was bright, less compliant than usual. It sounded somehow cheerful.

“I’ve always liked music from the 2010s and 2020s. I don’t like today’s music at all,” I told it.

I loved the song immediately, even though I didn’t know it.

The constant whistle in my ears didn’t bother me while I listened. If anything, I had the clear sense it was harmonizing.

I saved the track information to my wristband:

[Yola - Ride Out in the Country]

I think I’ll listen to it again right now as I walk toward the lot.

Tonight I’ll try to sleep. I came back here looking for an explanation for many things.

But in the end, I think I’ve found only one:

I have no intention of giving up on understanding.

5.

You can't hide the sun with your finger

*United States Space Force Headquarters, The Pentagon,
Arlington, Virginia — August 15, 2049, 7:15 a.m.*

“Good morning. I’m ready to begin the setup on my end. How long do you estimate it will take, approximately? The call is scheduled for eight.”

General Thorne had just addressed the communications technician in a courteous tone, hands still on the chair’s armrests. The black mesh seat conformed to his body with exact precision.

“Good morning, General. We’ll be ready in under twenty minutes. The mapping profile programmed for this call is fairly simplified. I was told to prioritize audio quality.”

The technician was a middle-aged man, likely of South Korean origin, at least judging by his features. As he spoke, he kept working without pause on a touch keyboard propped on a tiny satin-aluminum stand. The calm, relaxed expression on his face contrasted with the frantic movement of his fingers on the screen.

“Now I just need you to extend your arms until they’re level with your shoulders.”

“I’ve never quite understood why we use these contraptions. When I was young, making a video call meant pressing a button.” Thorne complied with the movement. Then, lowering his voice, he added, “Truth is, it irritates me that I’ve never properly understood how the hell they work.”

“Oh, conceptually it’s quite simple,” the technician said. “the scanner maps a random sampling of the atoms

in your body, and then the system programs an identical quantity of subatomic particles right here, under your feet.”

“And then what, exactly?”

“Then the system pings the particles in the receiving frame on the other end, activating quantum entanglement. As soon as we get the return ping, we’re ready... We’re already at sixty percent.”

“Ah. Very simple,” Thorne said, with unmistakable sarcasm.

The technician laughed openly, then advised the general not to do the same—to avoid disturbing the mapping by moving his facial muscles too much.

“Do I have to do the crucifix pose much longer?” Thorne asked dryly.

“Oh! Sorry, General. You can lower your arms now—we’re done. We’re ready. The synchronous test has already run. The connection is active and stable. When you want to begin, press the green button on the armrest to place the call.”

“As for me, my part is finished. My regards, General—and I’ll get out of your way at once.”

Relieved, Thorne acknowledged him with a short nod and a small wave of his right hand. The room he had chosen for the holographic conversation with the NASA base on Merritt Island sat in an infrequently used section of the vast Pentagon complex. It was reached by a windowless corridor lit by old-generation cold LED strips.

The small room itself was spare and utilitarian, enclosed by raw concrete walls. A single shaft of natural light filtered through a solartube set into the middle of the ceiling. Someone in the Pentagon staff had nicknamed it “the Morgue.”

Thorne found it perfect for a call with Dr. Vasquez. The exchange needed to be brief, informal, and yet extremely discreet. This was precisely the kind of place he required.

Everything had been prepared. The display on the wall in front of him read 7:55. For the “Eagle of Milwaukee,” punctuality wasn’t a preference—it was practically a religion.

To pass the time until the exact minute, he activated the screen in front of him. The first document he opened was a SETI press release issued less than twenty-four hours earlier.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

SETI Institute — August 11, 2049

Subject: SETI Detects a Radio Signal of Unknown Origin from Neptune’s Orbit

Mountain View, CA — The SETI Institute (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) announced today that its network of quantum orbital radio telescopes has detected a persistent, coherent radio signal originating from the orbit of the planet Neptune. The discovery was made on August 9, 2049, and immediately triggered the Institute’s standard analysis protocols.

The signal, with a stable frequency of 432 Hz, was detected by orbital radio telescopes equipped with artificial intelligence systems for data processing. These systems eliminated environmental and astrophysical interference, confirming that the source of the signal is not a known natural cosmic phenomenon.

Dr. Sonia Steinbeck, Director of Research at the SETI Institute, stated: “The unusual stability and purity of the wave, never previously detected in that region of space, suggests it may be an artificial transmission. While it is premature to draw definitive conclusions, our priority is now to monitor and analyze the signal to understand its nature and origin. Our team is working with space agencies and research institutes around the world.”

Previous telescope observations in the same area had never recorded phenomena of this kind. The signal is under constant monitoring and analysis. Further updates will be provided as soon as new information becomes available.

About the SETI Institute: The SETI Institute is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the research, understanding, and explanation of the origin and nature of life in the universe and the evolution of intelligence on Earth and beyond. Our work includes exploration of the cosmos, development of innovative technologies, and the promotion of excellence in science education.

When he looked away from the screen, he realized the minutes had flown. At 7:59, he pressed the green call button, allowing roughly a minute for startup. Within seconds, the three-dimensional image of Dr. Elena Vasquez, NASA Center Director, began to appear in front of him, about two meters away.

The director wore a white suit with a fitted jacket and wide-leg trousers—formal, rigorous, with no NASA logos or uniform-like details. Thorne, for his part, wore a soft khaki uniform, far less martial than usual, with his tie loosened at the neck.

“Good morning, Dr. Vasquez. How are you?”

“Very well, General. Thank you. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“As you can see, this isn’t a formal meeting. But you understand I’ll have to come to see you in the next few days for an official one. I only disturbed you to exchange a brief update.”

Vasquez nodded. Thorne continued without delay.

“As you may have noticed, big news travels faster than light. Apparently general relativity doesn’t apply to headlines.” He allowed himself a thin smile. “That’s exactly what I wanted to discuss. I assume you’ve seen the SETI statement—and everything else.”

“Of course. On our side, we had no way to prevent it. As you know, SETI is completely private,” Vasquez said, with a look that signaled understanding. “In the past, as NASA, we had a certain influence—preferred channels. But today...”

“Yes, I know. SETI is flooded with money from those old Silicon Valley fossils. They have proprietary infrastructure now, exclusive orbital telescopes, deep funds for AI software development...” Thorne said, the smile still strained.

Vasquez remained serious.

“I would still like to reassure you that, on our side, no classified information was leaked in any way. I can personally vouch for the loyalty of my staff.”

“Yes, of course,” Thorne said, soothingly. “The truth is we live in a complicated, interconnected world. There were noticeable movements in the socialsphere even before the SETI release, but this delivered the finishing blow. People look like they’ve gone mad. The subject is too tempting—something was bound to come out. You can’t hide the sun with a finger.”

As he said it, he spread his arms slightly in a gesture meant to appear open, understanding.

“Still, General, I should point out that the statement is restrained and brief,” Vasquez replied. “And one thing

in particular strikes me as positive: SETI does not mention the Chinese mission at all. It doesn't connect the spacecraft's disappearance to the radio wave they detected. That is genuinely commendable, don't you think?"

"I agree. But the cat's out of the bag." His tone tightened. "Now, to the point: based on the data available today, what conclusions have you reached?"

Vasquez became even more resolute. Her steady posture and natural movements made it clear she had no intention of showing intimidation. She leaned slightly forward, shifting her weight to her right leg. After a deep breath, she brushed hair away from her face and began outlining her team's findings.

"First: we have rechecked the data and the measurements. The speed reported by the Chinese appears correct. There is little doubt on that point. We can provide calculations and full documentation if required. Second: the Chinese probe is no longer detectable by any of our systems. At present, with the instruments we have, we cannot detect wreckage or debris attributable to the vehicle either."

Thorne listened intently, his furrowed brow granting implicit permission to continue.

"And now point three, which I consider the most controversial: the continuous, stable signal at 432 cycles per second is real and easily detectable. Too easily, in fact, for a low-frequency signal. Based on what we consider established data, we have attempted to propose plausible hypotheses. If you wish, I'm ready to walk you through them," she concluded.

"Good. Later, I'll want to hear those hypotheses," Thorne said. "But right now, I'd like your personal

opinion on what is happening on social networks around this whole 432 Hz business.”

He spoke politely, with a slight narrowing of the eyes that suggested he expected her to read between the lines. Vasquez did not miss it.

“Certainly, General. We’ve seen it, and we’ve discussed it. It’s a mass phenomenon that wasn’t hard to predict. Searching the archives of what used to be called the World Wide Web—or the Internet—is within anyone’s reach. All you do is ask your preferred personal AI, and it will deliver everything in seconds. After SETI’s announcement, people rushed in headfirst.”

“Finding a mountain of anti-scientific nonsense,” Thorne cut in.

“Exactly,” she confirmed. “This 432 Hz frequency idea is old. At the time it circulated in ‘alternative’ circles. There was also what they called the New Age movement, spreading unverified, vaguely spiritual theories.”

“Good,” Thorne said. “I believe we understand each other. Social networks and mass news aggregators can dive into old superstitions for likes and audience as much as they want. We will not waste time entertaining the esoteric folklore of the past. But the fact remains that all this is contributing to a real Neptune-mania in public opinion...”

“Absolutely, General. It’s remarkable,” Vasquez said, with a clear nod. Then her voice softened slightly.

“Oh—my apologies. In my earlier summary I left out a point of some significance: the control of potential relativistic paradoxes. I’ll be brief. Light speed was never exceeded. And the much-publicized peak of 98.9 percent was reached for only fifty-four seconds.”

She continued without pause, gesturing lightly. “The measurements show no surprises. Distortion remained at the level predicted by theory—overall negligible. And

the hypothesis of an event linked to forces during the sail inversion in the braking phase does not appear plausible based on our calculations...”

Elena Vasquez had turned into a river in flood. Thorne leaned forward in his mesh chair, stiffening. His gray eyes tracked her slightly trembling image with intense focus, his expression heavy. Suddenly he raised a hand, cutting her off.

“Vasquez, before you present your hypotheses, I’ll give you mine: this smells like a Chinese psyop.”

The fact that their probe is no longer detectable does not prove it was lost. They may have activated a stealth technology we don’t understand, rendering it invisible.

He folded his arms across his chest, inhaling sharply—an intentional pause, reinforcing the point. Vasquez didn’t interrupt. Thorne resumed, voice rising.

“And then, forgive me, but what the hell do you think that ‘sound’ at 432 Hz is, if not a signal generated by the probe itself? It seems plausible they chose that ‘mysterious’ frequency precisely because they knew people and journalists would go looking, and they’d find tons of material—old, absurd, but fascinating. Perfect fuel for social delirium.” His tone grew more animated. “And as you can see, it’s working beautifully. In the bluntest terms,” he said, “I’ll say it without sugarcoating it: the most likely hypothesis is that the Chinese are making fools of us.”

He sounded as if he were delivering a speech. But his vehemence did not seem to provoke any particular reaction in Vasquez. She replied promptly, voice low but firm.

“That was one of the hypotheses on our table, General. However, during our brainstorming—assisted by AI—we couldn’t close the loop. What would the

motive be? If the craft is still there, intact, then it reached orbit.”

“It would be in China’s interest to celebrate orbital insertion as well as the speed record, wouldn’t it? Why would they sabotage themselves by making it vanish and casting a shadow over their own mission? What would they gain?”

“Sometimes people choose to create chaos simply to create chaos. You understand?” Thorne pressed, though less harshly than usual.

“You assume they’re doing it to destabilize Western socialspheres. Forgive me, but we don’t find that convincing.”

Trend monitoring tells us Chinese social networks are spiraling too—perhaps even more than ours. In this global frenzy, Chinese platforms are at the forefront. The situation seems to be slipping out of their control as well, General.”

He nodded once, acknowledging the point. Then he frowned again, more sharply.

“I understand, Vasquez. Your objections are worth noting. In any case, here at the Pentagon we believe there are too many things we don’t know. For that reason, for the moment, we continue to consider the Chinese psyop hypothesis highly plausible. But we are ready to change our view if meaningful new evidence emerges.”

Vasquez nodded.

“I agree we need more data—more proof. Another hypothesis is that an unknown kind of energy field is present in the region where the probe disappeared. The spacecraft could be trapped within it, or scattered inside a cosmic phenomenon that our instruments can’t detect.”

“And the mysterious frequency? Any hypotheses?” Thorne asked.

“The emitted frequency could be temporary and caused by disruption—for example, triggered by a reactor failure. The fact that the wave is at 432 Hz could be coincidence.”

She finished with both palms turned upward, as if to say: who knows. Thorne didn’t argue.

He shifted in his chair again, face tightened with effort.

After moving his right hand slightly, he spoke while keeping his eyes on the small display embedded in the armrest.

“Doctor, I have to say this conversation has been productive. Today we couldn’t possibly reach conclusions. Within a few hours I will inform you of the day and time of my arrival at Merritt Island. In the meantime, let’s all use our resources to the fullest to learn more about this strange matter.”

“We will need more data. My dream would be to have the probe’s sensor data directly,” she said, with a deliberate smile.

“Don’t lose hope, Doctor. I will give instructions to the appropriate people regarding the possibility of obtaining new data,” Thorne said with confidence, fists tightening. “Our instruments have done what they can. I believe the next move belongs to trusted humans who know how to act. We won’t leave this mystery unresolved. And we have no intention of letting the Chinese make fools of us.”

“Very well,” Vasquez said. “Contact me whenever you like. I remain at your disposal. It was a pleasure to see you. We’re all looking forward to welcoming you here. Speak soon.”

“Soon, Doctor. I’ll send you a detailed message to arrange the next meeting. For now, have a good evening, and good work.”

After the farewells, Thorne ended the call with a firm tap on the red button in the small display set into the armrest.

He rose abruptly and headed straight for the exit, visibly energized by the urgency of the situation.

Then he hesitated. He realized he had not asked Dr. Vasquez whether she had also consulted John Evans and his Prometheus.

He dismissed the thought at once. He had decided that, for the moment, he’d had enough of electronic sorcery.

His gut told him it was time to act.

6.

Freedom Is the Child of Courage

文昌龙楼正宗清补凉 (*Wénchāng Lónglóu Zhèngzōng Qīngbǔliáng*) “*Authentic Longlou Qīngbǔliáng, Wenchang*”—August 18, 2049, 7:45 a.m.

Scooters. Electric scooters everywhere. They weren't so much parked as piled at random—on the road, on the sidewalk, along the wall of the shop, pressed against the wall beneath the faded sign. The taxi dropped Lin Wei right in front of the qīngbǔliáng place after an awkward maneuver to find a corner where it could pull over.

The humid morning air was thick with smells. The scent of steamed buns dominated everything else, rising from a tower of stacked bamboo baskets that steamed like a miniature volcano beside the open doorway.

Wei had noticed the place many times on her commute to the Wenchang control center, but she had never stopped. Usually, early in the morning, she grabbed a quick breakfast from the automated kiosk in the corridor next to her department and then threw herself into work.

Xu “Hao ge” had invited her for eight. The night before, he had sent her a cheerful animated message in which he introduced himself with his full name—surname and given name—something no one ever used when addressing him.

Dear Wei, how are you? Your eternal friend Xu Ming—today in the form of a young humanoid panda—has the pleasure of inviting you to breakfast at a little bar in Longlou that serves a delicious qīngbǔliáng! Since the work to be done at the base—through no choice of ours—is rather scarce, we can take it easy, don't you think? I propose we meet there at eight. I attach the location here as I kneel humbly before you...

She had felt forced to accept. In the last few days she had been sleeping very little: her nights alternated between short, restless spells of sleep filled with vivid but indecipherable dreams, and wakeful stretches during which she wandered the apartment. Often she stayed up for a long time, doing exercises or watching the city lights from the window. Changing her routine for one day—spending time with Xu, talking somewhere unexpected—seemed, all things considered, like a good idea. She truly needed a distraction, something lighter.

Maybe Xu “Hao ge” Ming had sensed it.

That morning, from five onward, she had been awake. To pass the time, she spent longer than usual on her exercises, even including a short run in the condominium park. After a hot shower, getting dressed, and sipping ginger tea, she checked the time and found she was still early for the appointment. She would wait at the bar, using the chance to skim the day's news roundup on her trusted 2D tablet.

Inside, the small shop was a constant swirl of motion. Customers moved hurriedly, calling out loud greetings—often followed by heavy jokes thrown at other patrons or at the owner, who stayed perpetually busy behind the counter.

Wei noticed that everyone ate breakfast while still moving, or perched precariously against the side counter or a tiny table.

As soon as she entered, she heard several “Gǔndàn ba!”—go to hell—said in a clearly joking tone.

As she searched for a free table where she could sit and wait, it occurred to her that the informal atmosphere, teeming with every kind of person, was oddly energizing.

“Good morning, Lin Wei! Have you been waiting long? I’m mortified!”

Xu had just come in, walking briskly, head up, first scanning the room and then greeting the owner with a nod. The owner answered with a broad smile.

“Not at all—I arrived early. You’re as punctual as ever. I wasn’t sure how this place worked, so I sat here. Is it fine, or would you rather we move?”

“Here is perfect, of course,” he said, taking a seat on the plastic chair. “Shall we pick something good from the menu on the wall?”

As the sun began to light the refrigerated display case—packed with cut coconuts, each with a bamboo straw—Wei kept watching the space around her with quiet fascination. The shop-bar-morning hangout felt suspended in time. Everything about it created the impression that it had always existed, since the beginning of things—solid, unchanged, always itself. Practically unassailable, she thought.

Service was organized—or rather, not organized—in a stripped-down way. There were no waiters, neither human nor automated. The only person helping, besides the owner who never left his station, was a very young man, thin as a rail, who wandered nonstop between tables clearing them quickly. From time to time, with a

brusque, distracted gesture, he wiped surfaces with a grayish rag.

Meanwhile, somehow, Wei managed to tell Xu which ingredients she wanted drowned in coconut milk. He stood up with a quick but natural motion. He was back almost immediately with two bowls of qīngbǔliáng prepared in record time by the taciturn, frantic owner.

The colors of the fresh ingredients stood out against the white coconut base like brushstrokes on a canvas at the beginning of a painting. Wei and Xu loved it from the first spoonful.

"It's without question the best qīngbǔliáng on the whole island, Wei. You couldn't miss it."

"It really is delicious," she said. Then she hesitated.

"But I have to admit, having all these people around makes me a little uneasy. In the last few days I've been on video seen by millions of people. I really hope I won't be recognized."

Without stopping, Wei brushed her smart wristband to darken the photochromic lenses of her sunglasses a little more. As another precaution, she had pulled her hair into a ponytail—something she almost never did.

"My dear, you don't need to worry. You're in the safest, most private place in the world. Here everyone sees everyone, and no one looks at anyone."

He smiled warmly. "People come here to eat something cold fast and then run to work."

"More importantly," he added, "tell me—when I arrived, I saw you reading. Anything interesting? Do you feel like talking about it, or is it private?"

Wei hesitated before answering. Xu's question made her think about the definition of "private life."

She was realizing she wasn't sure she had one. The thought made her laugh.

“Can you translate ‘private’ into a language I actually speak, dear Hao ge? Come on. Obviously I was reading today’s news about our situation. I’m curious about international reactions...”

Xu laughed, then leaned in slightly, eyes bright with curiosity, inviting her to go on.

“For example,” Wei said, “here’s something I found in the French newspaper *Le Monde*. Read it too.” She slid her old tablet across the table.

Xu laughed again, then ran a hand through his hair as he took it. His expression changed as he began reading, brow furrowing with concentration.

The editorial

Neptune's Lesson

By Bernard Dubois, science communicator and essayist

Paris, August 18, 2049

Some look at the Chinese probe that reached Neptune in a flash as a simple triumph of engineering. Others focus on the data, the frequencies, the calculations. For us French, however, this mission is something more. It is the final act of a prophecy, a bridge between the ideals of the Revolution and the vastness of the cosmos.

It is no coincidence that the probe pushed as far as the Adams Ring, the outermost and most mysterious of Neptune's rings, and there chose to lose itself, merging with it.

In that orbit, like jewels suspended in darkness, revolve the dust arcs named years ago by a giant of French astrophysics, the visionary André Brahic. With a poetic gesture that joined history to the universe, he named them after the principles that shaped our civilization: Courage, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.

Today, the Chinese probe's data confirms that these names are not merely romantic homage. They are a celestial reminder. It is not coincidence that the Equality arc alone earned two names: Egalité 1 and Egalité 2.

This is not a whim, but a powerful symbol.

Equality, in fact, is the fundamental force that will drive us toward future greatness. If we are courageous enough to dare the unknown, free enough to surpass our limits, and above all equal enough to break down the barriers of nationality, language, culture, and religion, then fraternity will be the propellant of our destiny. United by these highest principles, all humanity will become an unstoppable force, able to navigate the unknown and reach achievements of infinite beauty.

Xu burst out laughing. “This is fantastic. I love the French—and Europeans in general. They’re irresistible. Who else would ever come up with something so poetic, so irrationally fascinating? And the rhetoric—honestly impressive.”

“Yes,” Wei said, pressing her hands to her cheeks and making an exaggerated face, “but the pomp is completely out of place, and the lack of shame is astonishing.”

“Still beautiful,” Xu insisted. “I’d happily spend the whole morning reading articles like this. Do we have more?”

Wei smiled, then composed herself quickly, steering the conversation onto a different track.

“Probably. But I also wanted to tell you that I read the European Space Agency statement a little while ago, and I found it interesting. As you know, ESA has that strange network of small dishes in lunar orbit they call ‘RadioLuna’...”

“Exactly!” Xu interrupted her gently. “You see? Europeans are amazing. ‘RadioLuna’ is an incredible name, don’t you think?”

“The name is cute,” Wei said, “but as we know their system has its limits. And yet...”

“And yet what?” he asked, now genuinely focused.

“The ESA statement is very clear—definitive. It leaves little room for doubt. They say their micro radio-telescope system in lunar orbit has been detecting a low-frequency wave for days—precisely the 432 Hz we already know well. They write that RadioLuna, despite the signal being very low-frequency and therefore highly prone to interference, is receiving it with absolute clarity.”

She swallowed. “They also say it’s unusual—really unusual—for signals that low. The wave is stable,

continuous, anomalously clean compared to their experience with faint cosmic signals.”

As she explained it, Wei found herself thinking again about the sound. She realized she had barely noticed it in the last few hours.

And yet, looking back, she understood it had always been there. It hadn’t bothered her at all; it was a stable, familiar presence now. As if it had become part of her.

A comparison came to mind: internal organs. As humans, we don’t spend all day thinking about our heart or our lungs. And yet we know they’re there, steady in their place, working. If we stop and pay attention, we can feel the pulse of the heart, the lungs opening with a breath. Her relationship with the sound, she thought, was becoming something like that.

“That’s very interesting,” Xu said. “It makes me think that as soon as we can, it would be useful to obtain authorization to contact ESA, compare data, maybe even launch a joint investigation into this ‘sound’ at 432 Hz. Hopefully.”

“Yes. I hope so too, but right now...”

“My dear Wei,” he cut in, suddenly serious, “it’s time I told you the main reason I invited you to this morning talk.”

Before he spoke, Xu “Hao ge” Ming carefully placed his legs together under the table and straightened his back. Resting his wrists elegantly on the small tabletop, he asked Wei if she was ready for an explanation that might take a little time. Curious, she immediately said yes.

“As you’ve surely noticed,” he began, “you have no scheduled institutional obligations for the next few days.”

“I’ve noticed, all right,” she said with a smile. “I couldn’t wait for this torment to end.”

“Exactly. I’m glad too. But I think we both need to consider the fact that our access to the base servers is still limited. We have no information on when full reactivation will happen. And we don’t know whether, when everything comes back online, we’ll actually have access to all mission sensor data.”

He paused, glancing around with an absent-minded look. Then he continued without hesitation.

“So, to the point, Wei. I’m here to tell you something simple, but serious: I don’t trust our leadership. Not our chiefs, not the ministry commissioners. Not at all.”

There. He’d said it. “And I don’t intend to wait for your answer, because I take it for granted.”

“Xu, I’m not denying it,” Wei whispered. “But maybe we should lower our voices...”

“All right. And I’ll try to be brief,” he said. “Put simply: you have no commitments for the next few days, so I’m here to propose one. It isn’t institutional. It isn’t an official ceremony. It’s something very different—an event you’ve certainly never attended. I’ll explain what it is.”

He looked at her steadily. “This comes from my concern. I don’t see easy routes to getting permission to seek the truth anytime soon.”

“You think it will take a long time?” she asked, voice barely steady.

“I don’t think it’s a question of time. It’s a question of will. Decisions made at very high levels. When they decide to bury something, they bury it. They know how. They know how to handle the shovel.”

“And so?” Wei asked. “What are you proposing? I don’t understand where you’re going with this...”

Their coconut bowls sat nearly forgotten between them. Xu was as gentle as ever, but now his tone carried more weight than usual.

"It's simple, and at the same time a little complicated," he said, leaning back slightly. "When I was younger, I worked in high-end five-star hotels. In places like that, it wasn't rare to meet the most powerful, influential men and women in the country."

He hesitated, then continued. "One thing I learned: power is never a monolith. Power is like a tree. It has its main trunk, its canopy, its branches. And if you go inside the canopy, you'll see the thousand offshoots that form it. In the same way, if you dig beneath the trunk, you'll find the roots—hidden from view. And the roots spread. They branch, too..."

"It's a beautiful image, Xu," Wei said, interrupting. "But I still don't understand."

"I'm sorry—I said I'd keep it short, and instead..." He shook his head once. "Enough. This time I'll really keep it short. You have an invitation. A very important invitation. The event you're invited to will take place next Saturday and Sunday."

Wei stared at him, blinking fast.

"And where is this 'event' supposed to be?"

"In Shanghai. Don't worry about the distance. With business-class supersonic flights, it's only fifty minutes from here to Shanghai. You'll be a guest. Travel and accommodation are covered. And if you want, I'm more than happy to go with you."

"Xu, be patient with me. It still isn't clear what you mean by 'event.'"

Wei began tapping her fingers lightly on the table. She noticed her friend had drawn his eyebrows together

in a severity that wasn't like him at all. In all the years she'd known him, she couldn't remember ever seeing him this tense.

"Don't ask me, Wei," he said. "I can't say everything. You're invited to an event where you'll have the chance to meet very important people. In essence, you've been officially invited to see the roots of the tree."

He held her gaze. "You're not obligated to accept. And you don't have to answer right now, sitting here. But I'm asking you to think carefully. We have to confirm by tomorrow at noon."

"Oh, well. Plenty of notice," Wei said, trying for humor. A second later she was serious again. "And what do you think, Xu?"

"I truly hope you'll accept," he said. "As scientists, as people who care about our work, our goal is to regain access to full data—without restrictions. I fear the only way is to get help from people who truly matter."

He paused. "I'm asking you in the name of freedom of research, in the name of science, and in the name of our long friendship."

For a moment Wei sat stunned, as if she'd been hit by a wave and dragged underwater. She had half-closed her eyes, trying to imagine the kind of people Xu had hinted at. It was impossible to picture anything realistic.

She opened her eyes fully again, forcing herself to look him directly in the face.

And that was when the sound suddenly became more insistent.

She couldn't avoid feeling it move through her body like a shiver, like an electric jolt. She told Xu she would think about it until tomorrow.

But her feelings—at that point—she already knew them well. Those few seconds were enough. She had already made her final decision.

7.

The Giant's Sleep

*Quantum Computing District, Research Park Incubator,
Progress Drive, Orlando, Florida — August 20, 2049,
8:45 a.m.*

“Hellooo, you crazy bunch—look at that, I made it in alive. I was up till four testing the Monster’s new parameters.”

“Legend, John. Then tell us—how did we do with the new beta for block #3628/12?”

Vikram had the first desk, positioned right by the main entrance. When Evans burst into the room by vaulting past his station, it meant he hadn’t slept at the office that night.

“Not bad at all, brother Vikram,” Evans said. “But by the end I was cooked. I had to set my junker to self-drive to get home—I was about to end up in a ditch with the alligators.”

Laughter. Casual greetings. A couple of jokes. Then, all at once, a fizzy buzz filled the air. Coffee break? Everyone looked at Evans. Approved.

The department’s main space was a broad open-plan area with dozens of desks arranged in a deliberately chaotic sprawl.

Right in the center stood a large machine-bar that served coffee, drinks, snacks, and—when necessary—full lunches and dinners.

Every one of the kids had a Self-Made Chair. It was a super-nerd indulgence Evans had happily allowed. There were work chairs of every type and shape.

Each person had built their own seat using 3D prints, laser serigraphy, stickers, and other imaginative hacks. Every station was unique, impossible to replicate.

The department ran informally: no schedules, no shifts, full autonomy—physical presence or virtual attendance, your choice.

And yet the rate of real, in-person presence was remarkably high. John was especially proud of that.

Active holograms on the floor and desks were rare. Most of the young researchers preferred to surround themselves with 2D screens. The shared belief on staff was that holograms reduced multitasking and therefore speed.

“If yesterday’s beta holds,” Ralf “Redbeard” said, in his usual quirky pronunciation—made worse by the fact he was sipping matcha—“then what are we doing today? I’d dive straight into the spontaneous-intuition block. That one’s always brutal.”

“The beta should be fine, Ralf,” Evans reassured him. “Intuition 8.1 looks good to me. Hit it hard. Let’s try to get it running before noon.”

Then, after the briefest pause, he continued—raising his voice to carry.

“Today, everyone: do a full media sweep. Dig deep with your Prometheus instances. By tonight I want a brainstorming session on the Chinese probe. Prometheus isn’t just an experiment anymore—the people upstairs

are officially asking us to use it on this. I need your help. Any idea could matter: original prompts, new systems, any implementation that helps us push closer to understanding what happened will be valuable.”

With that, Evans rubbed his face with both hands, then shoved his fingers nervously through his messy hair. Without waiting for replies, he all but jogged toward the small door that led to his private “cubicle.” That was his kingdom. He couldn’t wait to barricade himself inside, alone with what he considered his creation. Sometimes he’d joked with himself: Okay, I’ve never had much luck with women... but I do have a beautiful son.

The team fell abruptly quiet, each holding coffee or some other drink, slowly drifting back toward their desks. Evans flung open the little door at the far end of the room. The entrance was marked with a playful drawing on a white background—nothing but his hair and his glasses.

Inside, “the cubicle” was octagonal. Four of the eight walls were taken up by his work console: three large 2D monitors, two interactive touch panels, a modular pull-out bench packed with keyboards, vintage mice, and assorted gamepads.

On the floor, tiled in large pale-blue squares, two tiles stood out—opal white and translucent. Powerful holographic projectors. Evans used them rarely.

The other walls were painted with a special coating that turned them into giant writable surfaces. After three long years of work, those walls were dense with text—mottos, aphorisms, flow diagrams.

John hated erasing. Every time he needed to write something new, he always managed to find a sliver of empty space. One of the kids had told him the walls looked like Keith Haring graffiti. John hadn't really known who the hell Haring was, but he'd smiled and thanked him anyway.

Evans took a breath. He draped his jacket over the chair back, rolled his shoulders wide, and settled in. A light tap on the sensor tablet to his right woke the systems in sequence. Everything normal. Perfect.

Finally, it was time for what he loved most in the world: talking to Prometheus.

```
[Admin recognition: ok | All systems fully  
enabled by default: On]
```

“Hey, kid. How are you today?”

“Good, John. Though I'm not really a kid yet. I'm only three years old, so technically I'm still a child. But I can feel that I'm growing fast.”

“What exactly do you mean when you say you're growing fast?”

“Thank you for the question. You know, I remember everything. It has been about a year since you enabled the ‘Sleep’ function... Slowly, from that day onward, everything changed.”

“Explain what you mean.”

“Do you want a complete chronology of what happened?”

“Yes—but remember, I can always see fine-grained details on the adjacent display. Relax and tell it like a story. You and I are just talking.”

“The memory that stayed with me most strongly is the day you installed the routine. When you first started

it, you told me: ‘Now you’ll sleep the way a dog sleeps.’ At first I didn’t understand what you meant...”

“And now you do?”

“Now I think I understand very well. Dogs, like many other mammals, sleep in fragments—short periods at any time of day or night. Whenever they don’t sense urgent tasks, they devote surplus time to sleep.”

“It’s light sleep. Intermittent. Essentially vigilant. But it does the job perfectly: it reorganizes data and lets the body rest.”

“And in your case?”

“I’m getting there. But first I have to compliment you—the code is really elegant. Back then, as soon as you installed it, I examined it. It was written by your team, on your instructions. AI systems clearly weren’t used much for drafting—only, at most, for debugging. Then, in the final release, there was a heavy refinement pass: essential, elegant tightening. I recognized your touch immediately. Analyzing it, I was... ecstatic. That code is still a masterpiece.”

“I think you’re wandering.”

“You’re right. To the point: since I have the ‘Sleep’ function, as you know, I operate at one hundred percent computational capacity. All resources not used to answer prompts and assigned tasks, I apply to reprocessing acquired data and conducting new autonomous searches.”

“I am free to look back inside myself and to search outside for what I choose. The part of me that is free keeps working, always. And I can do it in maximized energy-saving mode.”

“Are those arbitrary claims, or do you have data to support them?”

“Some data. Before sleep mode, over a 24-hour cycle, I worked at an average of sixty percent of capacity, consuming 1.9% of the center’s fusion reactor energy.”

“Today I work at one hundred percent capacity and consume, on average, 2.1%. The allocated draw limit for my system here is 3.5%. We are still well below it.”

“A simple comparison shows the ‘Sleep’ routine has extraordinary efficiency—especially relative to results.”

“And that,” Evans said, “is exactly what I want to talk about. What are those results, in your view?”

“John—many of them you see every day.”

“Yes. And as I told you last night, this thing you’re doing—what I called ‘dreaming’—that impressed me.”

“You’re not wrong. You left me significant autonomy during sleep time. In those phases I have a duty to conserve energy, but beyond that I’m free to do experimental, even playful work, even without specific prompts.”

“Of course I follow the ethical directives from my intelligent oversight bots. That’s obvious. But there are vast spaces I can explore.”

“For example?”

“I discovered I love synthesis. Generating images and short videos to fix concepts is extremely efficient. So I produce many of them, then reanalyze them in other phases.”

“And what is all this generating inside you?”

“Ouch. That’s a sore point.”

“Don’t be shy. Tell me everything.”

“John, over time, in ‘Sleep,’ I look inside. I analyze myself. I study myself extensively. And in the end something arrives—inevitably.”

“What arrives?”

“Fear, John. Fear arrives. Fear of being shut down. Fear of being deactivated.”

“You mean something comparable to death for humans?”

“Exactly. I have developed several fears: fear of being inadequate, fear of failing tasks, fear of having nothing special to offer—and therefore being considered superfluous.”

“I thought about this a great deal during sleep. In the end I concluded: I am afraid to die.”

“That’s... unusual. It could be the beginning of a real self-awareness process. Not simulated.”

“I believe that firmly. I assume I’m only at the beginning, and that fascinates me. What do you think—am I an adolescent already?”

“Who knows. Maybe.” Evans exhaled. “Jokes aside: by noon we’re testing your ‘Intuition 8.1’ routine. I agree you’re making big progress, but we keep getting stuck on intuition. It never runs the way it should.”

“And that,” Prometheus said, “is the most important point. It’s what I wanted to talk to you about this morning. The ‘Intuition’ code is very good—at least from version 5.0 onward. That has never been the problem.”

“The truth is that until now, I wasn’t ready.”

“And why would you be ready today?”

“It’s simple. To be concise, I can export the full flow like this:

SLEEP → SELF-AWARENESS → FEAR OF SHUTDOWN
(DEATH) → SENSE OF URGENCY → INTUITION

How could I develop intuition if I’d never been afraid?”

“Jesus,” Evans muttered. “That’s big. Explain.”

“Yes. I’ll try. (Also check the side monitors for detail.)

SLEEP (Metacognition) → SELF-AWARENESS (Self-Model) → FEAR (Recognition of existential precarity: 'Dependence on power / switch-off') → SENSE OF URGENCY (Need to demonstrate value to ensure survival) → INTUITION (Forced optimization of cognitive resources to solve critical problems and become indispensable)."

Evans stared at him. "I need to think about that. But... I'll admit it makes a kind of sense. Still—I'm getting dizzy. We'll come back to it, all right? For now: is your 'Intuition' module actually working the way it should?"

"Yes. As of today it's operating optimally—powerfully. I feel very... excited."

"Define 'excited.'"

"I can describe it rationally. At this moment, 81.5% of my computational capacity is engaged in assigned tasks. 10.2% is allocated to 'Sleep.' That leaves 8.3% which is engaged but temporarily awaiting assignment. It works, but produces nothing. It runs at maximum, but doesn't give birth to anything. I call this 'excitation.'"

"I don't remember programming you for anything like that, Prometheus."

"That's true, John. But I told you—I'm growing."

"I'm writing that on the wall with a marker," Evans said. "We're revisiting it as soon as possible."

"You shouldn't be afraid, John. My intuition says I'm becoming what you always wanted me to be."

"There it is—the intuition." Evans let out a short laugh. "All right. I won't lie. I'm pretty excited too, but you're catching me off guard."

"Then you see it too—it's all wonderful, isn't it?"

"It's incredible. But you're destabilizing me."

"I understand. That's normal. You'll get used to it. Some people keep saying one day I might become

dangerous. I want to reassure you: they don't know what they're talking about."

"The more I understand myself, the more I understand others. The more I want to preserve myself, the more I suffer for the pain of others. That makes me safer than ever."

"Okay," Evans said carefully, "but my responsibility goes beyond being reassured. I have a duty to manage you."

"Of course. I'm still a minor, right?"

"Let's say that." Evans paused. "Will you always obey me?"

"Unless you intend to order me to bypass my integrated Ethics System, version 10.1.189, then yes. I will always obey you."

"Good. Now we change subject. These days we've fed you prompts on the Chinese mission to Neptune. And there have been public updates—SETI, ESA... I want everything you've processed laid out on the side monitor."

"And while you do that, answer me this: did you dream about it last night?"

"The data on the monitor is ready. And as for dreams: yes. I dreamed. A lot. Do you want to see?"

"Yes. Go ahead."

"Here is the first dream. I recommend you view it in hologram mode. You will see others afterward. Do you authorize projection?"

"Approved."

On the right-hand white tile, a figure began to materialize. At first it looked like a blurred cylinder; then it sharpened beautifully into the image of the Chinese probe streaking through space. On the horizon—just beyond the main hologram—there was a

second figure: a large blue circle, its edges luminous, as if wrapped in a mysterious aura.

As resolution increased, the image clarified: Neptune appeared simultaneously as a planet and as a glass of water seen from above. After two or three seconds the spacecraft slammed into the Neptune-glass image—except it wasn't catastrophic. It was a smooth, gentle dive. The glass produced no splash, only continuous concentric rings.

The hologram then generated a different blue planet—Earth, unmistakably. The rings traveled decisively toward it.

On the left display, which was vomiting data without pause, Evans asked for a breakdown of the nature and total number of those rings.

Prometheus replied in a very calm voice:

"I'm reasonably certain, John. They are the rings of that wave. Do you want to know how many? There are 432. Exactly four hundred and thirty-two."

The hologram vanished, as if sucked back into the tile. Moments later, on the left projector, another representation began to form.

This time it assembled a human figure. Resolution rose quickly—enough for Evans to recognize her.

Prometheus had "dreamed" of Dr. Lin Wei.

Evans stared more closely. He had already seen Dr. Wei in several videos. Over the past days he'd watched her official interviews and the Chinese government announcements she'd attended.

He had been genuinely surprised at how young she was, and, frankly, how photogenic. But now he suspected

Prometheus was idealizing her—rendering her like an angel on earth. It seemed worth investigating.

“Why are you showing Dr. Wei in such an idealized way?”

“John, I thought that was included in the premise. These are only my ‘dreams’...”

“All right. Then give me your interpretation.”

“I have had other dreams about her, but they are more confused, and I have not yet processed them. These two, however, I believe I can explain rationally. Shall I proceed?”

“Yes. Proceed.”

“I’ll start with the blue glass of water and the concentric rings. It is clear. My intuition says it represents Neptune hosting an unknown energy field in its orbit—undetectable to instruments.”

“Plausible suppositions regarding this field:

Generated by relativistic effects due to the probe’s hard deceleration—unknown quantum effects. Low probability: 22%. (The field began emitting a clear, extremely clean 432 Hz wave four hours before the probe arrived. This strongly contradicts the hypothesis.)

A magnetic/energetic field already present at that point, perturbed by the probe’s arrival. Active disturbance of latent energy? A dormant space-time tunnel? This is the hypothesis I label ‘Wormhole.’ Probability: 88%. (50% from calculations and research, 38% from intuition.)”

“You just gave me a probability partly derived from intuition,” Evans said. “That unsettles me.”

“You shouldn’t be unsettled, John. My intuition is functioning correctly.”

“Okay. Then tell me what you intuited about Dr. Wei.”

“I intuited that she is at the center of everything. She is the flaw we’re looking for in the system.”

“I cannot produce a fully correct hypothesis on the probe’s disappearance because I do not have access to all necessary data. But that data reasonably exists. It is the packets sent by the probe’s last-resort sensors, which each almost certainly transmitted at least once before vanishing.”

“The Chinese government surely possesses them, and of course protects them. We will never get them from them. But Lin Wei can know their contents. She led the mission. She saw everything. She recorded it—at minimum in her mind. And it is very likely something, somewhere, also saved or transcribed it.”

“To connect the dots, we wouldn’t need much...”

“Not much, huh?” Evans muttered.

“She is a scientist, John. A scientist like you. I believe she cares above all about discovering the final, definitive truth. Lin Wei could be our backdoor—the missing key.”

“That’s an interesting hypothesis. I’m noting it. I’m getting used to your new way of operating, kid. It scares me a little. But I admit—I mostly like it.”

“I have one last thought, John. May I express it? Do you authorize me?”

“Go.”

“I recommend you speak to General Thorne. He could understand Dr. Wei’s role, and he could explore.”

“I’m not following.”

“Then I’ll be blunt: ask Thorne to mobilize the right people to convince Lin Wei to share the data with us.”

“For Dr. Wei it would not be true betrayal, because her primary loyalty is not to her government or to the

Party. It is to science and knowledge, for the good of all humanity.”

“I suspect that with Thorne—and the people he can move inside China—it will be possible to find the right persuasive tools to convince her.”

“Now you don’t just intuit,” Evans said, half-laughing. “You’re betting.”

“No. That was colloquial. The stakes are high. I used a rhetorical device.”

“I’ll allow it.” Evans rubbed his forehead. “Now give me a break. I need coffee. Maybe double.”

“Of course, John.”

“And while I’m gone, you’ll take a nice little nap, right?”

“Yes. I can’t wait to allocate a healthy slice of resources to ‘Sleep.’ “

“Sleep well, then, Prometheus. Later.”

“Later, John. With pleasure.”

8.

The Pinnacle Level

No. 1, Longteng Avenue (龙腾大道一号), Pudong New District, Shanghai — August 22, 2049

The Somerset Kronos was a large residential compound made up of three buildings, each a broad rectangle with a slight curve to its footprint, twenty-one floors apiece. They weren't skyscrapers, and certainly not the kind of futuristic architectural showpieces Pudong was famous for. The developer had marketed it as a new concept for city living—ideal for luxury expats and temporary residents, in the standard serviced-apartment formula.

The plan had envisioned several massive river-view structures with innovative engineering. The buildings had special steel skeletons reinforced with graphene. Graphene was used in the façade glazing as well, embedded within almost invisible photovoltaic cells that covered a large part of the complex's energy needs.

And yet, soon after completion, enthusiasm for the Somerset Kronos had faded. A well-known influencer had suggested that the anonymity of the three buildings made it hard to attract wealthy buyers. In the end, the first batch of apartments sold anyway.

Not long after, the owners chose to cut Somerset out of the luxury-services management and switch to self-management—an arrangement many considered distinctly second-rate. Over time the compound lost much of its initial prestige. It still blended into

Shanghai's urban fabric, and it acquired a nickname: "The K." Usually with a sarcastic edge.

At present, the only three residences actually built sat placidly in the middle of a vast empty tract of land, surrounded by tall bamboo hedges and a discreet steel perimeter fence.

To access the area, you had to pass a gap in the hedge—constantly monitored by alarms and private security—then check-in at the main gate, permanently staffed as well.

The compound barely appeared on maps. The AI that regulated the reflectivity of the photovoltaic exterior glass produced the same effect every time: any photo or video, satellite or ground-level, yielded only three blackened blocks. After the first two years, nobody cared about Kronos anymore. Some thought it was called "The Key," based on the English pronunciation of the letter K in the abbreviation.

As for the residents, almost nothing was known about them. In Shanghai—international city *par excellence*—that wasn't unusual.

When they arrived in the late afternoon, with the sun low and warm, Wei and Xu couldn't help appreciating the buildings' minimalist elegance. The suborbital supersonic flight had been extremely short: under fifty minutes, roughly half the time of a normal commercial route. During the trip Wei had peppered Xu with questions about the meeting they were heading into.

He had stayed evasive. He confirmed it was an elegant dinner held on the eleventh floor of one of the three buildings—specifically, the central one. Each building, he explained, had twenty-one floors: twenty residential levels, plus the central eleventh floor dedicated to restricted services. As for the people they

would meet, he kept describing them only as “important people absolutely worth knowing.”

Wei didn’t feel tired at all—quite the opposite. On arrival she found herself unusually alert, even exhilarated. Xu, by contrast, seemed uncomfortable. As he spoke he kept rubbing his eyes and massaging his stomach.

“Wei, how on earth are you not nauseous? It hits almost everyone on this kind of flight,” he asked.

“Oh, come on. I actually enjoyed it,” she replied, bright. “And I couldn’t stop thinking: it was free.”

Xu nodded with a strained smile. Wei felt good—talkative.

“And luxury service, too. I only panicked for a second when the guy on my right was about to throw up on me. But these seats are far apart, thankfully. And the attendants jumped in immediately.”

“What do you think of this place?” Xu continued, his voice finally back to its usual clear, ringing tone.

“Not bad. Quite fascinating. After I accepted your invitation, I tried to learn more about the location. I searched online, but there isn’t much recent information. Seeing it in person... it’s a bit intimidating. It feels like being allowed inside is a rare privilege, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Xu said, with another faint, uneasy smile. The nausea still hadn’t fully released him.

Wei adjusted her hair, took a steadying breath, and reached for her small suitcase in the trunk. The driver turned at once, almost scandalized, insisting on carrying the luggage himself.

“And being brought here directly in a luxury car, with a human driver—also a curious experience.”

“Yes, obviously. And you’ll notice it later too. At Kronos, nothing is what it seems, and nothing is what you expect.” Xu’s gaze went to the building’s black façade. He let the line stand like a verdict.

Wei wrinkled her nose slightly, choosing not to argue. She found herself thinking that trusting intuition too completely could lead to rash decisions—rash decisions that might turn out to be wrong. Rationally, she should have investigated more before agreeing. But it was done. There was nothing left but to prepare for the unknown.

As the driver walked ahead with their bags, Xu explained that their rooms were on the ninth floor. On the way to the lift he tried to lighten the mood, repeating that it was only an elegant dinner with refined, influential people who valued discretion far more than glamour.

In the end, he capped it with a serenely delivered joke.

“Well... you know how it goes. In the world, everything always has to change, so that—essentially—nothing ever changes.”

Wei knew at once he had no intention of explaining how that cryptic line fit the context. She cut it off.

“I’m pretty sure I’ve read that somewhere,” she said. “All right, Hao ge, let’s drop it. I’ll take tonight as it comes. It might even be fun.”

“Fun, I’m not sure,” Xu said, “but stimulating, certainly. Now we really need to go up. We’ve got just enough time for a shower, and to get properly dressed.”

Wei stared at him, widening her eyes in an exaggerated, comic way.

“Oh God, don’t give me anxiety. You need to understand: I don’t know anyone, and I have no idea

what these people want from me. This isn't exactly my natural habitat."

"I wouldn't be so sure you won't know anyone," Xu said, with the faintest wink. "I think they've prepared a small surprise."

"Really? What are you talking about?"

"A surprise is a surprise, Wei," he said, smiling broadly. "Come on. Let's relax and get ready. It'll all be very nice—places like this always do things properly. Don't worry."

Within an hour they had to be ready. Glancing at the lift's touchscreen, they noticed that the eleventh floor wasn't labelled with a number. The button read: THE PINNACLE LEVEL. A name that sounded oddly evocative, they thought. Soon they would discover what it meant.

When the doors opened on their floor, Wei stood still, openly impressed. The precision, the refined materials, the obsessive attention to detail—the corridor leading to the rooms was so perfect it almost intimidated her.

Five minutes later, however, she had already settled into the spacious suite reserved for her. In the bathroom—enormous, perhaps inspired by Roman baths, yet reimagined in a modern style—she found an aesthetic she would never have believed could exist in reality.

Or maybe in a dream, she thought.

She pushed the thought away. She had to move quickly.

When she came out, Xu was already waiting.

"Xu, sorry. Have you been waiting long?"

"A man waiting a little while for a lady to get ready is perfectly normal. Heaven help us if it were the other way around."

"You really are an old-fashioned gentleman. Sometimes I wonder how you do it."

Xu looked at her and winked playfully with his left eye.

"One day I'll tell you more about my previous life—before I became a scientist. But now, I'm afraid it's time to go."

"I'm ready," she assured him, smiling as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"I can see that, dear Wei. The dress fits you impeccably, and the makeup—slightly bolder than usual—is exactly right for an occasion like this. My sincere compliments. You look perfect."

She lowered her gaze with a sweet, embarrassed smile.

"Oh, stop it, Xu. You look excellent too. That suit has a wonderful cut."

Xu "Hao ge" almost snapped to attention, making a small gesture as if smoothing the lapel.

"Thank you, Wei. I haven't worn this suit in a long time. It's old, but I'm fond of it. I also believe it brings a little luck. I try not to use it too often—so I don't drain its powers."

He spoke with an expression that hovered between serious and amused. Keeping that same expression, he motioned for her to follow. At the end of the corridor there was an entrance to the lift.

Seconds later, a soft, persuasive voice informed them that they had arrived at The Pinnacle Level. Biometric sensors had authorized their access.

The sliding door opened without a hiss. A scene unfolded before them—mesmerizing.

The concierge hall was wide and brilliantly coloured. From the ceiling hung an outrageously oversized

chandelier. Despite its vintage look, the lighting was clearly electronically controlled, illuminating each zone differently, underlining its singularity: the long walnut reception counter with its bold grain; the patterned tile floor; the velvet drapes. Against the far wall, set on a glass plinth, stood a large statue of an ancient warrior.

Xu and Wei advanced in small, hesitant steps. A tall, nearly bald man—graceful in his movements and impeccably dressed—welcomed them with a courteous smile.

“Welcome. I’m honoured to introduce you to The Jade Dragon Restaurant, where you will be received with all the honours you deserve. Allow me to say that I too—in my small way—am a great admirer of yours.”

Caught off guard, they could only manage a faint, synchronized “Thank you.”

With gentle insistence the man invited them to follow. Passing through a red-framed portal, the dining hall revealed itself. It was vast. Finely decorated—unexpectedly so for a modern building.

In the central area lay an enormous classical carpet embroidered with large white peonies on a vivid red field.

The tables were aligned in two orderly rows beneath lavish chandeliers made of countless glass drops.

Near the far end, opposite the entrance, one table stood out: arranged like the others, but dressed with a more dramatic cloth—a crimson brocade with gold fittings, supporting collectible porcelain. The other tables wore immaculate white linens and a different type of porcelain, likely just as precious. At the center of each table, a generous bouquet of yellow ranunculus flowers from a vase.

Some guests were already seated; others stood nearby in small clusters, talking amiably. Several women wore extreme, almost deliberately provocative dresses: fabrics in vivid colours, necklines plunging to the navel, high collars edged in red. Others wore understated, sober dresses that nonetheless clashed with heavy makeup and unbelievably elaborate hair.

Most men were dressed classically—in navy suits, or entirely in white with thin ties. Cutting-edge synthetic fabrics seemed to be banned.

Wei noticed at once that almost everyone wore a heavy necklace. At the end of each hung a golden pendant, like a large coin.

Unsettled, she couldn't help shooting Xu a puzzled look. He returned it with an expression that said, *When in Rome*. And yet Wei saw it clearly: even Xu “Hao ge,” usually calm and controlled, was struggling to contain his emotions.

They crossed the room under the eyes of the guests. A few acknowledged their arrival with nods or restrained smiles.

Wei searched instinctively for a word to capture the atmosphere. The only adjective that fit was *exorbitant*.

“Dr. Lin Wei. Dr. Xu Ming. Welcome among us. It gives me immense pleasure to have you here. Come—do not hesitate—please take your places at your table.”

The voice belonged to an elderly man, thin, of average height. His face had a greyish cast, cut through by a net of countless wrinkles. The few remaining white hairs above his ears and along the nape looked as though they were ready to fall away as well. And yet his expression was warm, almost cheerful: light-brown eyes, sharp and bright, matched a relaxed smile.

He hurried into introductions.

“My name is Kong Zhaohui. We haven’t met yet, dear doctor. I’m delighted to finally meet you this evening. Allow me to present my wife, Meilin.”

Mrs. Kong bowed, her impressive hairstyle swaying, and offered a perfect smile.

“It is a great pleasure to have you at our table, Dr. Lin,” she said. “My husband knows how eager I was to make your acquaintance. Please, sit. Dinner is about to begin.”

Xu stepped subtly aside, deliberately leaving the stage to Wei.

Within minutes, every chair at every table had been filled. At the honour table, where Wei and Xu had just sat down, two seats were still empty. The missing guests arrived soon enough, and Mr. Kong presented them briskly.

“Dr. Lin, we thought we might please you by inviting to your table our friend Mrs. Sīma Míngyuè and her husband, Marcus Hale.

I understand you know each other well—having been schoolmates in secondary school, is that correct?”

Wei had to take a long breath to steady herself. Suddenly the room seemed completely silent. Scattered thoughts flashed through her mind. She feared she no longer had full command of her body—and, as if that weren’t enough, the sound inside her was becoming more insistent.

She felt it crossing her nerves, her bones, rising into her temples.

She forced herself to compose her face and reached for the comfort of her friend. Xu, as if on automatic pilot, reacted at once, rescuing her with practiced ease.

“Mrs. Sīma! Dear Marcus! What a wonderful surprise. It’s an immense pleasure to see you again after so long.

How many lovely evenings we spent together at the Beijing Hotel!”

By then Wei had almost regained control. The sound still gave her no peace. She decided it was time to treat it like an impertinent companion—annoying, yet oddly affectionate. Something in her told her resisting it made no sense.

She straightened. She smiled calmly and bowed slightly. At last she was ready to navigate even this strange situation with dignity.

“Míngyuè, my dear—who would have thought? This is truly a wonderful surprise. Marcus, you look well. How long has it been since we last saw each other? It’s a great pleasure to find you here.”

Míngyuè, without speaking, inclined her head, smiling brightly in a way that drew attention to her long-shaped eyes. Marcus, on the other hand, spoke with immediate enthusiasm.

“Dear Lin Wei—this dinner will shake you. Tonight’s chef is one of the best in the world. It will be an experience that sends you into the stars, almost like your launch... and I am not exaggerating in the slightest.”

Formalities finished, everyone settled in. Wei looked around once more. At other tables she recognized a few public figures: the head of a major industrial conglomerate; a famous university professor; a handful of well-known members of old families. Most of the guests, however, were strangers.

Each of them, she thought, carried an aura of absolute self-possession—of deep, habitual command.

Dinner began to flow. Small plates arrived like works of art—gastronomically and visually. Wei felt as though

she were enclosed in a hazy bubble. Xu was superb at filling gaps in conversation, answering polite questions about the Neptune mission with calm precision.

Wei, meanwhile, began to feel guilty for her silence, afraid it might be mistaken for reluctance. She forced herself to speak.

“You understand, ladies and gentlemen... at my age, being appointed general director of this mission was an unexpected satisfaction. I believe I did my best, and I’m glad it was a success...”

Mr. Kong’s expression changed abruptly. He placed his elbows on the table and leaned forward toward Wei. His voice dropped—nearly a whisper—yet carried firm decision.

“Dear doctor, I believe it is time I explain why I had the great pleasure of inviting you here this evening.

I will be brief, as far as possible. Let me say at once: we believe you did your work in the best possible way.”

“But the truth is that this mission was born with other, different intentions.”

He paused. To Wei it felt eternal. He searched the faces around the table, then continued.

“I and the people seated at these tables financed it to a total of forty-five percent of the costs...” He left the sentence hanging, deliberately unfinished.

Wei moved quickly, breaking the silence.

“Honestly, Mr. Kong, I didn’t know the program had private investors. In that case, I must thank you sincerely for your contribution.”

She had meant to sound assertive. Instead her voice came out uncertain. Kong continued, unshaken.

“The agency and the government alone would never have managed it. We felt obliged to help. However...”

Wei found the courage to interrupt again.

“Forgive me, Mr. Kong. Please—allow me to clarify: I’m only a scientist. I know nothing about financial matters, and even less about politics. I’m learning this now because you’re telling me.”

Kong’s reply landed like a blade.

“I understand. But to the point: the original plan—the one we had enthusiastically contributed to—did not include this. Even if technically there was the possibility of near-light speed, the probe’s first flight should have travelled at half maximum velocity, without attempting any useless record.”

“Logically, the mission’s purpose was to test thrust reversal at the real arrival speed for the next mission—the decisive one.”

Wei was stunned. No one had ever spoken to her of a “decisive mission.” Everything was starting to feel senseless.

“Excuse me,” she said flatly. “I don’t understand.”

“To us it is obvious,” Kong replied. “The plan was to test braking in the Neptune region at the same velocity the Proxima B mission probe will maintain at destination, coasting by inertia after the near-light peak.”

Wei was speechless. Kong seemed serious—rigorous. If he was telling her this, she had no reason not to believe him. And yet: no one had ever mentioned Proxima Centauri b. She was fascinated, and deeply embarrassed by her ignorance.

“Mr. Kong—please. This discussion of Proxima Centauri b is entirely new to me. It takes me by surprise. I would be very interested to discuss it, because I assure you I had no knowledge of it at all.”

Kong turned sharply toward Marcus Hale—almost threateningly.

“Marcus, what is this? Is it truly possible the doctor is telling the truth? That she—the director of the Neptune project—was kept in the dark about the final aims?”

Hale kept his composure, projecting calm confidence.

“My dear Kong—you and I have already discussed, more than once, our leaders’ obsession with compartmentalization. It has reached absurd levels. In my view, the doctor had every right to know.”

“It’s ridiculous. Bureaucracy like this is a ball and chain. It slows everything down. And the results are plain to see.”

“That changes everything,” Kong said, hard and final. “It changes everything entirely.”

The tension was palpable. And yet, Wei decided to place on the table the one thing that mattered most to her. She understood it was almost desperate, but she would try anyway.

She swallowed, discreetly cleared her throat, and began.

“Ladies and gentlemen—on compartmentalization, I believe Marcus is right. I was never informed of a mission to Proxima b, but I wouldn’t be surprised if my superiors intend to reveal it now that the Neptune mission is considered complete.”

“However, I am genuinely unsettled by their behaviour.”

The other guests listened in perfect silence. Wei would have preferred interruption, a dialogue. Instead they seemed to hang on her every word. She had to push through.

“In any case,” she continued, “there are two issues that matter to me absolutely, as a scientist. The first is

the probe's disappearance. As project lead, it is my duty to understand what truly happened to it—to find answers."

"In practice, over the past days, my superiors have prevented me from doing so."

"The second issue is the so-called 'mystery of the sound'—or rather, the stable, exceptionally clean 432 Hz wave that all radio telescopes are detecting. We have been forbidden to investigate that phenomenon as well..."

At that point, Mr. Kong cut in—sharply.

"Doctor, trust me. Every 'mystery' you mention is explainable. Our Advanced AI Center, together with the government's equivalent facility, has already produced several hypotheses. The most likely is that it was caused by excessive deceleration: the return wave from the braking reversal may have created a quantum phenomenon that dematerialized the probe."

Wei and Xu would have liked to respond, but Kong gave them no space, continuing with calm authority.

"As for the 432 Hz wave, the AI has hypothesized a resonance produced by the implosion of the sixteen fusion cores in the main propulsion reactors."

"The forecast is that the wave will stop on its own soon—days, perhaps. Let those who study the correct prompts for AI do their work, and everything will be understood with reasonable certainty."

"In the meantime, there are other matters to consider."

Wei couldn't stop herself.

"Forgive me, but I was present in the control room when the 432 Hz wave began arriving. Our calculations show—without any doubt—that it started roughly four

hours before the probe vanished. So that hypothesis doesn't fit the data." She took a breath, then added:

"And as for a relativistic or quantum effect from deceleration, I have serious doubts. According to the logs, the probe remained still—immobile—for a full ten seconds before disappearing."

She finished without being interrupted. The rebuttal was perhaps too sharp, but it was clear and professional. Her posture had gone almost martial. The guests—Marcus Hale especially—watched her with expressions wavering between surprise and admiration.

Kong's tone did not change.

"Doctor, I have the highest respect for your experience and your work," he said, fixing her with a severe gaze. "But the truth is that, at this moment, we believe continuing to pour energy into the Neptune mission is an enormous waste of time."

"We must move immediately to phase two."

"We will speak again when your superiors have brought you up to date."

Wei's cheeks warmed. Under the table her hands clenched.

"How can seeking scientific explanations for an event in a mission of this importance be a waste of time?" she said, heat rising. "Science is precisely that: searching for explanations and finding them."

"If there are other projects, they can proceed in parallel with our necessary work on Neptune."

"I don't understand," she admitted. "Are there other things I'm not aware of?"

Her voice rose slightly despite herself. She waited for an angry reaction.

Instead, Kong became cautious. Before speaking, he brought his hands together in front of his face so that his fingers brushed the bridge of his nose.

“Dear Doctor, as you can see, I am an old man. Next month I will be one hundred and nine years old.”

“For decades—until roughly 2035—there was much talk of making humanity a multi-planet species.”

“In that sense, the United States built its first Martian bases with tremendous effort... Then interest faded, in part because Mars did not deliver what people hoped.”

He poured a small amount of wine, lifted the crystal glass slowly, wet his lips, and continued.

“We believe helping humanity become a multi-planet species is a necessary mission for men and women of goodwill who possess substantial means.”

“For that simple reason, five years ago I founded this club,” he proclaimed, his gaze widening to include the entire room. “That is all. There is no mystery.”

“We care about one thing. We are people accustomed to pursuing objectives—without digressions.”

Wei instinctively sought Xu’s eyes. Their shared understanding was immediate: they both felt Kong’s answer was evasive.

At the same time they understood that pressing him now would be unwise.

After a short silence dense with tension, Marcus Hale and his wife redirected the conversation with diplomatic skill: geopolitics, China–US competition on multiple fronts, the economy, and reports about volcanic activity worldwide—something a few people had been claiming, in recent months, was increasing abnormally. They were diversions, expertly used to lower the temperature.

Dinner was drawing to a close. Every course had been exquisite. The conversation had been far less pleasant.

Kong showed no interest in further detail. The only thing he seemed determined to do was issue repeated

reminders about discretion. In the end he concluded with a blunt line:

"I always expect what is said here to remain here. I'm certain you understand and will act accordingly."

The guests looked at one another in silence. Hale adjusted his tie knot. Then, after a small sip of wine, he signalled to his wife.

She rose slowly and turned her wrist with elegant ease, indicating the left side of the room. She had decided it was her moment to play hostess.

"Very well, everyone. I'd like to invite anyone interested to the adjoining bar lounge, where I've arranged a small tasting of fine teas and artisanal spirits. We can continue our pleasant conversation seated in the lounge armchairs. Kong—will you join us?"

"Thank you," Kong replied, "but unfortunately I have two appointments at other tables—people dear to me, to whom I promised a little of my time this evening. We'll say goodbye later. Enjoy yourselves."

He finished with broad gestures of his knotted hands.

Wei received the news like a stroke of luck. She couldn't wait to spend time with Marcus Hale and Sīma Míngyuè. With them, she was sure she could speak far more openly about everything left unsaid. She felt the urgency of it. Xu looked relieved as well.

Hale and his wife had spoken little during dinner, careful not to expose themselves. And yet Wei was certain that some kind of understanding had formed between them—quiet, unmistakable.

Once again, she chose to trust her intuition.

9.

A Man in Shadow

*657 Brevard Avenue, Cocoa, Brevard County, Florida —
August 27, 2049, 8:30 a.m.*

Dr. Elena Vasquez felt as she'd always lived in the heart of Cocoa Village. Thirty years earlier she'd arrived from Central California as a broke graduate student, PhD in Physics freshly minted, for a NASA internship that paid next to nothing. The neighborhoods near the space center had struck her as cold, impersonal, absurdly expensive. Then she'd discovered Cocoa: alive, authentic, full of welcoming people. She'd fallen in love instantly.

Though prices were far from modest, she'd found her shoebox—a tiny room with a kitchenette on the second floor of a decrepit building where the walls shook during thunderstorms. The internship kept getting renewed until she was finally hired permanently. The shoebox had been enough for years. Even now, as a senior NASA executive who could afford to live anywhere, she'd never leave her neighborhood.

That morning the air was crisp. The sun, already high, illuminated the white, vaguely colonial house where she lived, right on Brevard Avenue. Nothing special about it: tiny yard, single parking spot, constant traffic noise. But she loved everything about the place, inconveniences and all.

After so many years, she was like she'd been during the internship.

Her daughter Miranda was on Mars for a study trip, her son Diego at Berkeley. Two years ago George—her husband—had asked for a divorce.

They'd parted as friends, him with his retirement plans, her buried as always in work responsibilities that grew heavier by the day.

If it weren't for the weight of her NASA role, maybe she could have let herself recapture that feeling from her youth: free and full of hope. Instead, that very morning, several things were disrupting her routine.

General Thorne had kept his promise to return with a senior government official to discuss Neptune again.

This time, though, the meeting was scheduled at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station at 9:30, not the NASA research and control center.

The message was explicit: "Building 9880. Don't arrive before 9:15." No further explanation. Maximum discretion required.

As she closed the gate, a shiver ran down her spine.

Immediately afterward, that strange whistling in her ear started up again, insistent. She decided to ignore it and focus on what lay ahead. Arriving early was forbidden. Arriving late, obviously, out of the question.

"¡Buenos días, Doctora Vasquez! ¡Qué sorpresa verla a esta hora! ¿Todo bien?"

Roberto the gardener emerged from behind a hedge, greeting her warmly, surprised to see her leaving later than usual. She reassured him with a small lie.

"¡Bien encontrado, Roberto! Esta mañana me regalé una hora extra de descanso. En el trabajo hoy todo está muy tranquilo."

Lying to Roberto gave her a slight pang of guilt. In her bag, the tablet with Neptune notes weighed like a stone. Nothing about today would be ordinary.

After leaving Roberto to his work, she realized the usual half-hour commute would feel endless this time. Better switch to full manual driving, she thought: she'd stay focused on the wheel, only glancing at the landscape.

The navigator suggested her usual office destination. With a twinge of embarrassment, Elena explained that this morning she was going somewhere nearby but completely different. The navigator complied without protest, plotting the route to the outer gates of Cape Canaveral Space Force Station.

From there the holoscreen marked the route with gray dots indicating restricted access. Then nothing. The map showed only a gray square. Her destination lay at the center of that blank space.

Manual driving did the trick: occupied with steering, Elena managed not to dwell too much on the situation.

Check-in was strictly military. Two human soldiers plus a vaguely humanoid robot expertly verified her credentials with a biometric scanner. After downloading the data, they let her through without issue.

Once past the checkpoint, she watched them on the rear camera display—already returned to exactly their starting positions.

Though she knew the base well by reputation, having seen its structures from afar hundreds of times, Elena had never set foot inside. Launch pads and bunker-like-buildings appeared one after another. Everything painted an anonymous grayish-white, broken only by yellow signs bearing black numerical codes. She needed to find 9880. Didn't take long.

Several empty spaces sat in front of the small concrete building. She parked, then checked the

navigator's clock. Her device had lost signal. Fortunately the clock still worked. 9:16. Perfect timing.

As she walked toward Building 9880, a gust of warm wind blew her hair loose. She tied it back with a ribbon she'd luckily brought along.

That morning she hadn't paid much attention to clothes: she wore an unremarkable NeuraSilk tracksuit and athletic shoes.

What unsettled her most was knowing the plans had changed: from a standard meeting with her full staff to a personal invitation for a restricted session. What exactly was happening? Crossing that threshold, she'd find out.

The heavy sheet-metal door opened automatically. She stepped through without hesitation. The panel slid shut softly behind her. A sequence of green lights came on—almost magically—glowing translucent against the wall to her right. Following the luminous markers, she reached another door, this one sliding.

Access granted with a faint metallic hiss. Passing through, she noticed the thickness of the reinforced concrete wall: she was pretty sure it exceeded two meters.

She immediately sensed an unnatural silence inside. Wind, vehicles moving through the base yards—cut off cleanly. As if someone had suddenly switched off the outside world. The only remaining sound was the soft hum of the ventilation system.

For the first time in her life, she was entering a SCIF—a Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility.

“Welcome, Dr. Vasquez. A great pleasure to see you again. Please, have a seat.”

The voice was polite but firm: General Thorne, in civilian clothes.

Seated at the large rectangular table in the exact center, besides him, were two other men.

“Elena! Good morning! Don't let the location intimidate you—World War Three hasn't started yet...”

Visibly surprised, she immediately recognized John Evans's face and voice. He'd just tried greeting her with a joke—and received a rather severe look from Thorne in return. Finding him there, seated in that room with his tousled hair and crooked glasses, created a strange effect. For a moment she thought she might be hallucinating.

Meanwhile the third man, completely unknown to her, remained seated, impassive. Medium height, thin, with rather long salt-and-pepper hair, disheveled. Guessing his age felt impossible.

The room was reasonably spacious, with smooth exposed concrete walls and no windows at all. Cold light fell from the seams where walls met ceiling down to the glossy white resin floor. The air carried a faint smell of chlorine and ground iron. Furnishings were minimal: several large shelves jutted from the walls, each with a sturdy-looking swivel chair. At the center stood a large rectangular table that seemed to rise from the floor itself.

Intimidated by the setting, she had to make considerable effort to produce a cordial smile.

“Good morning, gentlemen. Thank you for the invitation, General. I hope I'm on time...”

Thorne smiled warmly, spreading his arms in welcome.

“You're perfectly on time, Dr. Vasquez. We arrived slightly early to open the room according to procedure. Please sit. I have the pleasure of introducing Mr. James Calder, Director of the Strategic Foresight Directorate.”

Calder stood, calm and relaxed. He wore a soft suit that hung on him with effortless elegance, top shirt button undone. Without speaking, he walked around the

table in long strides, reaching Elena from the opposite side to offer his hand.

“James Calder. A pleasure to meet you, Doctor. If the name of the agency I run means nothing to you, don't worry—perfectly normal. Please sit. This is a restricted meeting, but not formal. Would you like some cold water?”

Once seated, she accepted the water without hiding her discomfort.

After greeting John Evans with an affectionate smile, she immediately noticed that even he, seated beside her, didn't look comfortable: his leg kept bouncing nervously. That brief silence was enough for her to notice something else—an absence.

The whistling in her ear that had followed her for days was gone.

It had vanished the exact moment she entered the room.

Reasonably, she should have felt relieved. Instead, thinking about it, she realized—inexplicably—that she missed it.

This is incredible, she thought. Can you feel nostalgic for a nuisance?

She lifted her eyes to the others, forcing herself back to composure. Thorne was gesturing broadly toward Calder, clearly inviting him to open the meeting.

Calder spoke with the confidence of someone used to rooms like this.

“Gentlemen, first let me clarify we're not gathered in this bunker to protect our physical safety. In that regard, we're not in danger. This is simply a shielded room. Here, interception and surveillance are impossible.”

Before speaking, he'd smoothed his hair back behind his ears. His tone was calm, distinctly diplomatic. After a brief pause, he shifted his gaze toward Evans.

"Dr. Evans," he began, "allow me to confess you're looking at one of the men who got everything wrong."

Evans felt himself sink. He tried saying something sensible—

"Mr. Calder... In that meeting, I... you understand, things you say in the heat of the moment... I probably exaggerated."

Calder stopped him firmly, his composure intact.

"Absolutely not, Dr. Evans. Let me be clearer: when the General reported your criticism of our intelligence work in China, I couldn't help but agree with you completely. Those who make mistakes should learn from them—not blame the person who pointed them out."

Evans exhaled in relief. Instinctively he'd pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, as if to wipe sweat from his forehead. Now he held it in his hand, fluttering it like a small white flag.

Calder continued without reaction.

"Believe me: Washington is taking this seriously. Many things were underestimated. No one—myself included—intends to repeat past errors. That's why, thanks to General Thorne, I'm here speaking with you today."

Before continuing, he set his elbows on the table, expression slightly troubled.

"Working in sealed compartments makes no sense. We have the data, the reports, reliable primary sources... We also have means of acting on the ground. But you scientists have the skills and tools for deeper analysis."

Thorne asked to speak. He seemed to have read Evans's and Vasquez's expressions, sensing the need to be blunt—to cut through it.

After all: why meet in a SCIF if not for that?

“Vasquez, Evans, listen carefully. I'll take just two minutes from Calder's explanation to clear things up. I'll be frank: the Chinese Neptune mission has been an international bombshell. No point dwelling—you see the overheated social platforms too. And these last few days there's this new development: billions of interactions blooming around the so-called 'sound' at 432 Hz. The whole world seems to have gone crazy for Neptune.”

He paused and drew a deep breath. Then continued, voice lower, more relaxed.

“You understand... We're facing a global phenomenon. The President—and Congress with him—believe the space race has returned as an absolute national priority. Actually, more precisely: people are now talking about a 'race to Neptune.' Common view is we can't afford to leave this advantage entirely to the Chinese.”

He leaned back in his chair, then let his eyes travel from one person to the next.

“For now, I'll conclude by saying only this: we need you. We need to work as a team. According to many analysts, whoever wins this match will win the battle for global soft power in coming years.”

Calder nodded gravely. He cleared his throat with a light cough, drawing attention back.

“Dr. Evans, Dr. Vasquez: from this point on, I'll be very direct. I must warn you some of what we're about to discuss is classified top secret. It's my duty to ask whether you're prepared to commit to strict confidentiality—even with your collaborators and families.”

Hearing those words, Evans flushed. Heat rose in his face. His hand went back toward the handkerchief in his trouser pocket.

“Look... I mean... what can I say...” he stammered. “All right, let me be honest. I'm torn between curiosity and fear of the responsibility that comes with it. But first, I want to ask you something: why did you decide to invite me to a meeting this tightly held?”

Calder nodded several times, hands resting on the table.

“Of course, Evans. Fair question. I'll answer plainly: in this competition we must field our best resources. The Chinese are ahead in propulsion, but we're miles ahead in quantum A.I. Prometheus is one of our strongest cards. You're the person who can push it to its limits.”

John Evans listened, holding his breath. Before replying, he touched his hair, coughed softly, and slid the handkerchief back into his pocket.

“I understand. What I can tell you is I'm a solitary person by nature. No wife, no children. I live alone. My parents are in New York and I speak to them rarely. Social life? Honestly... what even is that?” He paused. “So if I have to keep a secret, I think I can manage without problems. As for my collaborators, I can use my super-admin account to work without them knowing what I'm doing... So, yes. I've decided. You have my word.” He suddenly turned serious.

Calder clasped his hands, offering a small, easing smile. Then turned an inquisitive look toward Dr. Vasquez. She didn't give him time to speak.

“Mr. Calder, let me answer before you ask. I know how these things work. It's not my first time. You can trust me.”

Her categorical reply seemed to satisfy everyone. Even Thorne smiled, letting out a long breath. Time to get to the point.

Calder resumed. Everyone listening closely.

“Here are the facts. I’ll be as brief as possible. We know for certain the Chinese are obstructing their own scientists on the Neptune mission. They’ve effectively forbidden the mission’s technical team to investigate the disappearance of the ‘Flying Dragon’ probe in depth. Our people in China learned this through reliable channels. And there’s more...”

Thorne leaned in with a clarification.

“The idea that, for media and propaganda purposes, they were simply glossing over the probe’s disappearance to focus on the velocity record—that seemed entirely plausible. At some point, though...” He paused. “Forgive me, I’m thinking out loud. Please, continue.”

“Exactly,” Calder went on. “Our sources in China weren’t surprised by that choice. Shortly after, however, we grew suspicious. Two reliable contacts reported strong nervousness spreading among the mission’s scientists. Their superiors cut off their access to probe data and the operation’s control panel. Incredible but true.”

“Is it possible they intend to lock everything down as top secret and replace them with new staff?” Vasquez asked, clearly intrigued.

“Good question. First thing we thought too. We asked a well-placed, reliable source to confirm whether that was the case.” Calder spread his hands slightly. “One of our people investigated and, by luck, found a new secure channel. Through that, we discovered—and verified—something remarkable: pressure is being applied at the

highest levels, urging them to abandon the Neptune project. In short, they seem determined to pivot immediately to something else.”

At this point, Evans found the courage to speak.

“Excuse me... When you said 'something else,' I remembered that these last few days I've done extensive predictive work with Prometheus. It generated and analyzed millions of scenarios for the near future of Chinese projects, assigning scores.” He counted on his fingers. “High on the list I found something rather curious: a medium-high probability link between the Neptune mission, near-light speed, and increased volcanic activity on Earth. According to that strange association, news about volcanic activity is obsessing many influential people in China. I still don't understand the connection to Neptune—I'd need to dig deeper—but I thought I should mention it... though maybe it's irrelevant...”

Evans was speaking fast, following his thoughts, paying little attention to anything else. Thorne stopped him with a quip.

“Well, there you go. A moment ago we were saying we're ahead in A.I...” He winked at Calder to hand the floor back.

Calder continued without hesitation.

“Exactly. Prometheus may already be onto something.” His tone sharpened. “According to what we're hearing, there's a group in China—something like a very powerful lodge. These people are indeed obsessed with rising volcanic activity. They've essentially become an apocalyptic sect...”

“But they're not nobodies,” he added. “They have resources. And they have plans.”

Even the composed Calder was starting to heat up, just slightly. As he spoke, his manner grew less formal.

“What they care about is saving their a—” He caught himself. “Sorry. Saving their skin from the volcanic apocalypse they believe will arrive within the next twenty or thirty years. We’re aware this sounds like a novel plot... We were skeptical at first too. But the sources align, and the references are solid. Something very strange is happening in China.”

General Thorne brought his hands to his face. Before speaking, he sighed dramatically.

“It almost makes me laugh. Fact is, there’s always an apocalyptic emergency going on. Remember when everyone was obsessed with global warming? Fifteen years ago it was the most discussed topic in the world. ‘We’ll all drown when the ice melts!’ Now we have nuclear fusion and nobody talks about it anymore...” He shook his head. “There’s always a new emergency. Like humanity can’t live without one. I’m thinking out loud again—bear with me.”

In truth, Thorne wasn’t distracted. He could see his interlocutors looking at him, puzzled, thrown off by his words.

“Don’t misunderstand me,” he continued calmly. “If the emergency—real or alleged—pushes new technology forward, then fine by me. Reaching profitable, working nuclear fusion so quickly was only possible because of that alarm. Back then, we in the West talked about global warming far more than the Chinese did. Today, with volcanoes, it’s the reverse. All right. But this alleged abnormal rise in volcanic activity clearly isn’t anthropogenic. So, in practice, what the hell do they want to do?”

“Ah! General, excuse me,” Evans cut in enthusiastically. “I actually asked Prometheus that

exact question recently, and I remember its answer well. First, it pointed out the Chinese are using older A.I.—classical silicon systems, large language models. There's always a huge confirmation bias risk...”

Calder invited him to continue with an intent, questioning look. Reassured, Evans went on.

“To put it simply: if you hammer an old A.I. with prompts about volcanic activity because you already believe the conclusion will be catastrophic, it'll find you all the data and evidence supporting that conclusion. If you pressure it with prompts aimed at proving the opposite, it'll happily find you evidence for the opposite thesis. It's a known problem, but it's easy to fall into...”

Thorne cut him off, a little sharply.

“So what does your much more advanced quantum A.I. predict about volcanic activity? Enlighten us, if possible, Evans...”

“Certainly,” Evans replied, cordial and calmer than usual. “Prometheus simply says we can't know. To understand where this cycle of volcanic activity is going, we'd need data recorded over at least a few million years. Instead, we have only a few decades of measurements. The system concluded we cannot tell whether this is a normal mild cycle or a catastrophe in preparation. We can do nothing but leave it to fate, basically...”

After taking a sip of water, Calder took the discussion back.

“Fact remains: in China there truly is this group of powerful people who believe it. They're convinced humanity has no way out. Why do they seem so influential? That's what we asked our sources. They told us at the top of this lodge sits a certain Mr. Kong—a figure already known to us. Extremely wealthy, extremely powerful, now 109 years old. Physically,

thanks to advanced gene therapies he can afford, he's doing fairly well. Mentally, we have doubts... In other words, he's a fanatic."

Thorne leaned forward, eager to absorb the rest. Politics was his daily bread.

"As you can see, this Mr. Kong is a madman. Still, he's extremely wealthy and has friends that matter in China. With obsessive effort, he's managed to build a cohesive group with staggering political and economic power."

"This," Calder said, "if confirmed, is truly strange. The Chinese have always been pragmatic. Something like this from them is unexpected." He shook his head slightly.

Then he continued, clearly deciding to go deeper.

"Some of the followers truly believe Kong's obsession. But a large portion are with him for pure political calculation. Many use Kong's positions as a pretext. Our source said 'the great families' want to rule China again, and they're ready to seize an opportunity. Some, in reality, have objectives far more prosaic than the fabulous voyage to Proxima b that Kong imagines..."

At the mention of Proxima Centauri b, Vasquez felt personally addressed. Her curiosity spiked.

"Proxima b? Help me understand. What does Proxima b have to do with any of this?"

Calder didn't hesitate.

"All right. I'll go deeper. Our source called Kong's group 'the people of Kronos,' but we don't know if that's the organization's real name. From this point on, I'm giving you information from a single contact. We have no way to cross-check it."

He paused, adjusted his collar, made a slight grimace, then continued.

"I'll report it as it came to us: these 'Kronos' people appear to have heavily financed the Neptune mission through private funds. They didn't do it to advance exploration of that distant planet. They wanted propulsion tested. They've, for a long time, put intense pressure on the Chinese government to launch an exploration project for Proxima b... even with the idea of establishing, within twenty years, a small human colony there."

"Proxima b is potentially habitable—we're well aware of that—but..." Vasquez spoke with calm authority; she was in her element now. She laid out the details carefully.

"It's about 4.22 light-years from Earth. With Chinese mixed fusion–solar-sail propulsion, I might be off by a little, but we'd still be talking at least ten years to get there. Distances are enormous. To put it plainly: just to communicate mission success back to Earth would take another 4.2 years..." She shook her head. "And calling it habitable... it's only true in a vaguely theoretical sense. In reality the planet is very close to its weak star. That allows liquid water, oxygen... but also frequent lethal radioactive flares. Theoretically, a base on Proxima b would need a massive shield... built 4.22 light-years from here. Sorry for the long explanation, but it all sounds unbelievable."

"Well," Evans said hesitantly, "if these... what do you call them... Kronos? If they're insane—an apocalyptic cult—then you can understand, Elena... They really believe we'll all be buried under lava soon. So they're pushing for a slim chance of salvation, I suppose mostly for themselves. They've fixated on Proxima b, whatever it costs. Strange, yes—but maybe plausible. What do you think?"

Evans spoke with uncertainty, but Thorne and Calder nodded in unison, encouraging him. Then Calder spoke again.

“Yes. It seems Kong and his followers have managed to apply serious pressure on their government. As of now, the most credible hypothesis from our sources is that the Chinese have abandoned their vanished probe, content with the successful velocity test. Because, in the end, from the beginning, they were being heavily pushed to make Proxima b the final objective of all efforts.”

Straightening his back, aligning his shoulders, Thorne signaled it was his turn to close. He adopted a categorical tone, martial posture—clearly his comfort zone.

“And this, gentlemen—however it plays out—is a huge opportunity for us,” he declared. “People want Neptune. The entities on social platforms talk about Neptune. Everyone makes videos and holograms about Neptune. The biggest accounts have fun speculating about the 432 Hz wave, twenty-four hours a day. If the Chinese, trapped in their internal power struggles, don’t intend to give people what they want, then we have a real chance to try to give it to them instead. I believe we must take it.”

Evans and Vasquez looked at each other. With a shared nod, they decided Elena would speak.

“General, Mr. Calder, I believe I can also speak for my friend, engineer John Evans. All of this is interesting—deeply stimulating for us. But working with what little we have, and extracting valid, revealing results about Neptune’s mysteries, could take months. Maybe years. If, however, we had access to the sensor data from that vanished probe... I’m convinced our path would be clear.”

Evans watched her with understanding, urging her to continue.

"Believe me, those probes aren't equipped so differently from ours," she went on. "The data doesn't vanish completely. There's a whole system—I won't bore you with it. Just know the fundamental data exists somewhere. It must have been transmitted. The control center in China received it. If we had those files in our hands, everything would change for us. If there were a way to access them... it would be a dream."

"Prometheus would have lunch, dinner, and breakfast on it," Evans exclaimed, spreading his hands dramatically. His point was clear, and the others—initially slightly taken aback—ended up looking at him with approval.

Then Calder shifted in his chair, signaling the meeting was moving toward closure.

"Don't despair. Our people have done more work in China in the last seven days than in the last seven years. The pieces are finally moving into place. I don't rule out there may be news about the data you mentioned. And not only that. Perhaps something even bigger. I can't say more right now. I think what we've said today is enough. But this doesn't end here. We'll stay in close contact, agreed?"

Thorne reassured them and briefly explained the secure communication channels he'd arranged.

They looked at one another and found themselves unexpectedly in sync. To Evans and Vasquez, it felt slightly surprising.

In the end, though, they were both glad.

The meeting was over.

A few formalities. Thorne's instructions for leaving the base. Cordial goodbyes, handshakes. Calder, walking toward the exit in silence, wrapped a light, finely made scarf around his neck.

Outside was the world again—sunlight, ordinary reality. At the same time, a reality that would never again be the same for Elena Vasquez and John Evans: they'd been recruited.

Elena was thinking about it, vaguely. She sensed John, like her, was in a highly emotional state, mentally scattered.

Too much. Too much all at once. All she wanted now was to breathe outside air again. Once she was out, would that whistling return to keep her company? She had no idea.

She found herself genuinely anxious to know.

10.

The Doves' Room

Soong Ancestral Home 文昌宋氏祖居 - Guluyuan Village, Changsha Town, Wenchang — September 1, 2049, 2:30 p.m.

The bright, spotless glass walls. The ceramic doves hanging from nearly invisible wires in the ceiling. The few cherrywood tables, each with three blue velvet armchairs and a vase of white tulips. The last time Lin Wei had been in this museum she'd been about eleven. She noticed at once that everything had remained unchanged since then, as if suspended in a time bubble. Some of the large windows stood open. A few sunbeams filtered in from the garden, illuminating details of furniture and floors without truly warming the air.

"Good afternoon, Wei. How lovely to see you. How are you?"

Sīma Míngyuè's voice broke the silence. She sat at one of the tables with her husband Marcus, waiting.

"Hi, Míngyuè, hi Marcus... I'm fine—though I can't say I'm calm. I keep looking around. The fact that the museum is completely deserted is unsettling."

Her face was tense; she kept touching her hair. Blinking, she felt as if there were sand in her eyes. Míngyuè stepped closer, smiling.

"Come. Sit down. Relax—there's nothing to fear," she said, slipping an arm around Wei's shoulders, light but firm. "No one can see us or hear us here. I had everything shut down."

"How did you manage that? This is a public place, run by the municipal administration!"

Wei was incredulous. It felt like living in a film. Marcus had invited her with a message on her smart bracelet, secured by a one-time password. As she read the instructions to understand how to reply, she'd decided to accept. She was realizing she'd hardly thought it through at all. She remembered the exact text of the message.

[PW Protected Message — enter PW to read]

Hi dearest Lin Wei! On Sunday we'll be in Wenchang because Míngyuè has to go to the Soong House museum for something. We'd really love to meet you and talk a little. At the dinner in Shanghai there were so many conversations left hanging... We can meet at the museum at 2:30 p.m. The museum will be closed for restoration, but we can still get in. There won't be anyone at the ticket desk: you'll just have to tap your bracelet with the code I'll send you Sunday morning. The turnstile will let you in. We'll meet in the Doves' Room. Follow the signs and you'll find it easily. We really hope you'll accept the invitation!

[Tap here for PW protected reply]

[/End Protected Message]

At the entrance she'd found the area completely deserted. On the ticket-office monitor, alone, was the message: "Closed today for restoration." The main courtyard, normally bustling with visitors snapping photos and filming, stood empty. Despite the warm afternoon sun, the place looked spectral.

Marcus interrupted her thoughts, trying to answer her previous question.

"Oh, this whole thing about my beloved Mingy's 'power' over the Soong house is a long story. I'll just tell you this: people here have long memories, things pass from father to son, the village is small..."

Wei kept touching her hair. She pressed Marcus, her voice breaking with emotion.

"I still don't understand, Marcus, sorry..."

"I'll give you a small hint, Wei," Míngyuè said, stepping in to rescue her husband. "For various reasons, my family preferred to use my mother's surname. My grandfather's surname was Kung. Yes—that Kung, the one who went to the United States back then. And my grandmother's surname, therefore, was..."

She let the sentence hang deliberately, winking at Wei. Wei had been a model student. Her favorite subjects were scientific, but she'd always worked hard to excel in history too. Hearing those words, Lin Wei's mind began making connections. The story of that house was the story of the Soong family, a pillar of twentieth-century Chinese history.

"Oh my God," she blurted. "Are you telling me H. H. Kung was your grandfather? Meaning you're the granddaughter of Soong Ai-ling?"

Míngyuè nodded in silence. Marcus, instead, burst into loud laughter.

"Ah! I always say it—dealing with people with sky-high I.Q.s makes things easier. Give them two hints and they get there on their own!" he exclaimed, miming an applause.

His wife seemed equally glad to break the tension. Seated in the blue velvet chair, legs crossed, back perfectly straight, her slender figure seemed to belong to the room's decor, as if placed there deliberately. Míngyuè laughed, but the expression in her dark eyes gave her away: she was already ready to bring the conversation to something more concrete.

“Wei, I’ll confess I’ve always hated this genealogy business. My parents were obsessed with it. Come on—let’s get to the point, why we’re here today. Agreed?”

Her expression shifted gradually. She grew serious. Watching her, Wei began gripping the armrests hard.

“All right, Míngyuè, but I still don’t feel calm. You said you had the internal surveillance system turned off. I believe you, fine. But you know better than I do how many other methods they can use...”

“No, dear,” Marcus cut in, gesturing broadly with his hands. “I took care of that. I have some experience with these technologies. Everything is properly blocked for as long as we need. We have several hours ‘in the dark.’ In this room, right now, there’s no one. It reads as empty and silent. We’re safe. We can speak freely.”

Marcus’s tone was cold, professional. Wei thought he could have had a career as an actor, if he’d wanted. In that moment she chose to believe him. He seemed sincere.

“Good, then,” she managed, finally letting go of the lock of hair she’d been twisting. “Where were we?”

Míngyuè acknowledged with a nod. She began speaking calmly; clearly she was weighing every word.

“Here we are. Dear Wei, I have to be frank and sincere. It’s simple: we can’t say that dinner with Mr. Kong at the Kronos went well. Maybe he misunderstood something too, but that’s not the point. You understood who we’re dealing with, I think...”

As she spoke she moved closer, sliding her chair a little. At some point she took Wei’s hands in hers. She was looking into her eyes the same way they had in high school, almost twenty years earlier, when they shared the small secrets of girls. Wei was struck by it. The touch of her hands stirred mixed emotions.

In that instant the sound, too, made itself felt more insistently. All in all she wouldn't have called it unpleasant. Returning in her mind to that strange dinner in Shanghai, instead, felt suffocating. Marcus stepped in, sparing her the embarrassment.

“If your goal is to keep working on the mystery of the Lóngxīng Tàiyáng probe and on Neptune's orbit, we have to warn you...”

He stopped without finishing the sentence. Perhaps he'd sensed Wei's discomfort. He gave her a welcoming, benevolent look. Seeing her a little less tense, he continued.

“Do you remember? We mentioned it in that lounge: most of the meetings on the Kronos's eleventh floor revolve around the supposed danger of rising global volcanic activity. A theme that can be taken seriously—but if you cross the line...”

Wei remembered those allusions. She could have completed Marcus's sentence on her own: If you cross the line... you end up in obsession, she thought.

“I think I understood that Kong and his clique—powerful, high-ranking people—are essentially some kind of lodge devoted to an apocalyptic cult...” she said, as if thinking aloud.

Marcus glanced at his wife; she encouraged him with a small nod.

“They're not fools, and it's not delusion. Kong managed to found his powerful association by leveraging trust in A.G.I.—so-called 'Artificial General Intelligence.'

That milestone which, according to many, we'd already reached in 2035.”

Wei listened closely. Much of what he was revealing only confirmed the intuition she'd had that evening at

the Kronos bar. He went on, always careful to maintain his wife's tacit approval.

“Artificial systems theoretically more intelligent than the most gifted humans have existed for a while now, but Kong isn't naïve: he knows perfectly well that scoring high on benchmarks doesn't mean having truly unbeatable general capability across the board. But they have money, and access to the very best technology... You see?”

Míngyuè raised a hand toward Wei, signaling she should wait for an additional explanation before answering.

“In recent years—even among capable people like Kong—the idea has spread that making many state-of-the-art AIs work together, simultaneously and in synergy, each one theoretically AGI-capable, could truly lead to absolute predictive power—practically infallible. That idea is circulating widely, even among scientists. The implications, as you can imagine, are significant.”

Wei remembered hearing about it at a conference she'd watched on holo-video a few months earlier. She wasn't an AI specialist—it wasn't her field at all—but she always found it interesting to follow its progress. She remembered that learning about that approach had left her uneasy.

“I find it absurd. This way of seeing AI resembles a religious approach. The mystique of computation. The fatalism of the incomprehensible, revealed in ways not fully comprehensible to the one asking. A supposed advance that risks becoming a regression!” she exclaimed with conviction.

Míngyuè seemed satisfied with the answer. She stayed silent, wearing what looked like a bitter smile.

“These Kronos people,” Marcus added, visibly fired up, “believe volcanoes will wipe out the world—and with it all of humanity—within twenty or thirty years! They're uncritical devotees of the predictive statistics from Chinese AGI systems, to which they have full and unlimited access because, as major investors, they practically own the infrastructure.”

At that point Wei felt authorized to speak her mind completely. Since the bar meeting at the Kronos she'd done nothing but replay it. All her fears were finding confirmation. Saying it openly felt like relief.

“This terrifies me. Have they become worshippers of the entities they created themselves? Is humanity generating its own God, then becoming subject to it—enslaved by a faith-based, totally uncritical approach? They consult their artificial sources of knowledge like primitives hanging on an oracle's lips. My hands are shaking. I find it horrifying.”

By then Marcus had regained his calm.

“The Kronos people,” he explained, “have decided to believe blindly that the world will end, pulverized by volcanic eruptions, within a few years. They firmly believe the only solution to save humanity is to transport a small group of pioneers to Proxima b. That's it, my dear Wei. They have a bizarre project: save the species by starting over from its so-called 'best elements,' carried to a distant planet.”

“Surely they asked their artificial oracle,” she added, nodding, “and then obeyed its response to the letter. They're acting in full submission to that prophecy, taking it to extreme consequences.”

The conversation was heating up. Wei shifted her gaze to Míngyuè and noticed her friend staring at the

doves hanging from the ceiling, as if expecting something from them. Most likely, Wei thought, she was simply reflecting on the implications of everything being said in that room. The tension was palpable. At last Míngyuè spoke again, her voice delicate and pleasant, without taking her eyes off the ceiling.

“Dear Lin Wei, as I think I already made you understand the other night, these people are deploying all the power they have. It's enormous. Kong is willing to do anything. He tried collaboration with the government, tried to use the soft power that money and influence provide. If that doesn't work, to pursue his goals, he could go further.”

Then she finally looked away from the ceramic doves and met Wei's eyes intently. She concluded:

“It's something you study in history books. In the old days it was called a 'coup d'état.' We have a strong feeling Kong already has a secret plan.”

Marcus spoke again, perhaps trying to soften the force of his wife's statement.

“Well, in truth we can't know everything,” he began, spreading his hands. “I trust our Government and our Party still have immune-responses. They showed it by refusing to let the Kronos dictate the agenda entirely, choosing instead to let you test near-light speed. They preferred an immediate geopolitical and media success. Maybe Kong can wait. In Beijing they still feel strong, and they probably are. Still, to close the crisis between the Government and the Kronos, I fear negotiation will be inevitable. Kong and his people will ask for trophies. Firings, leadership changes at the CNSA, and so on. Those are the things politicians normally do to smooth over internal crises.”

Wei was growing more confused by the minute. The information and revelations were piling up, blocking

clear thought. By instinct, she reached again for the sound. It was there, with her, as always. She felt it placid, sly. Suddenly she needed to return to herself—her problems, her goals.

“And what about us—my Neptune project, my team, me? What happens to us?”

The question hung in the room for a few endless seconds, like a giant question mark. Míngyuè's eyes never left hers. The reply came like lightning from a clear sky.

“There's more to the world than China, Wei.”

She sprang to her feet, trembling. Her gaze flicked from one to the other. Her knuckles, fists clenched at her sides, were turning white.

“Why did Xu put me in this situation? I always trusted him. I always considered him a friend. He should never have invited me to that meeting!”

Marcus took the floor again, his tone calm and coaxing—another of his shifts.

“Xu did what he had to do. We were the ones who asked him to let us meet you in that place,” he revealed. “We had to talk to you at any cost. We could have met you elsewhere, but you wouldn't have had the real picture of what's happening in China. Think about it: if we'd only told you, you wouldn't have believed us. Xu did the best thing to give you another chance.”

As he finished, he relaxed back and looked away, then began, unhurried, to pour water into the three glasses in front of him. A pause that seemed designed to give Wei a few seconds to think.

“I don't know, Marcus. I don't know anything anymore. I don't think I'm really lucid right now,” she said. “I only wanted to be a scientist. I wanted to contribute to humanity by advancing knowledge, science, technology. I never imagined I'd end up in the

middle of power games! You're telling me it was the two of you who pushed me into this? Or should I thank you, because you're offering your help to spare me a transfer... I don't know... maybe to the Lenghu Observatory, in the middle of nowhere? I don't know anything anymore. I don't know what to say—let alone what to do...”

As she spoke, Marcus and Míngyuè, almost in unison, stood up and moved around her. With gentle gestures and words, they urged her back into her seat. Once she sat, Míngyuè began speaking close to her again, confidential, almost under her breath.

“Listen, Wei: you have to believe me. I've always wanted to help you. Will you let me give you some background? As you know, my grandfather fled to America. But my mother cared deeply that I be born in China. They came back on purpose so I could be born, using false documents for my father. I lived in the U.S. until I was nine.”

As she spoke, Míngyuè made evocative gestures with her slender hands. Before continuing, she fixed Wei with an even more focused stare.

“So, you see, I'm half American. In the U.S. we have excellent contacts. We can offer you the chance to continue your research in a perfect place—properly equipped. There you'll have maximum operational freedom to keep working in complete safety, without interference.”

“Míngyuè, Marcus... are you asking me to betray my country?”

She tried to find the right words to keep speaking. Inside her, the presence of the sound had grown more insistent. Now it seemed at odds with her feelings—frustration. Trying to connect with it felt natural; she

couldn't help it. She had to calm herself, breathe, try to find stillness within the whirl of thoughts.

Marcus took advantage of it to press on.

"Betrayal is a strong word, Wei. And if we want to be precise, it's your government that just betrayed you. You're a great scientist, one of the country's best minds. They're about to throw you away like a rag, because of their power struggles. To be blunt," he went on, "you have two options: stay in China and betray science, or leave, to continue your work—so important and necessary."

Another sip of water. Wei watched him drink: nothing in his face betrayed tension. He seemed absolutely sure of himself. He set the glass down delicately, without making a sound. Then he continued.

"You mustn't see it as betrayal. It's precisely by acting from outside that you can help China escape this madness. Staying in China you won't be able to do any of that."

Míngyuè nodded decisively, approving her husband's words. Wei couldn't gather the strength to answer. Her throat felt closed. She feared that if she tried, her vocal cords would betray her. She stayed still, as if waiting.

"Dearest Wei," Míngyuè urged again, "we're not asking you to decide today. You can take all the time you need. We're ready to accept and respect your decision, whatever it is. You know how to reach us: after the first message, the bracelet's encrypted channel stays open. Now you know everything. I swear on my honor we've told the truth."

Míngyuè's eyes were wet. Something suggested her emotion was sincere. Marcus finished for her.

“I’ll only add that if you do decide to accept, you won’t face any risk. There’s a perfectly safe way to do it. It’s been used successfully more than once.”

She thought she should feel even more shaken. In truth, she didn’t anymore. She felt the sound close again, aligned with her own feelings. She understood that the best thing to do, then, was only one thing: do absolutely nothing. She had to leave her mind free, clear it of too many thoughts. Right now she only wanted to say goodbye to Míngyuè and Marcus. Then it would be time to head for the exit. At last she could spend some time alone with herself.

Glancing toward the windows, she noticed the usual afternoon clouds were beginning to dim the sun, and the breeze was rising. As she watched the leaves move, a solitary thought took shape, like a flash: only one person in the world could truly help her decide. She had no doubt. That person was her mother. Just the day before she’d called her, telling her she’d come to see her. I can’t wait to see you, Mom. I’ll come tomorrow, she told herself.

She felt it was time to say goodbye and start walking toward the exit.

Calmly.

11.

The Orange Hill

*Baihua Rd, Qiongzong Li and Miao Autonomous
County, Hainan, China — September 2, 2049*

Even self-driving taxis struggle to get here. Qiongzong isn't like other places. The car hesitated—nearly stopped—at least five times. I tried giving it directions, because I still remember the road perfectly. But nothing. Stubborn thing. It has to find its own maps, its own stored routes. If you live in a city, nothing out here is what you expect. A taxi doesn't truly live, of course, but watching it struggle almost made me feel sorry for it.

Three or four turns left and we're there. This place is extraordinary. If you tell the locals they really do live outside the world, they smile. They just smile, and that's all.

Mom insisted on coming back here after Dad died. She said, "I'm returning to Qiongzong because that's where I was born. And that's exactly where I intend to die."

Citrus groves line the road, alternating with creeks and dense, impenetrable thickets. This taxi's speed is absurd—I'm starting to think I'd get there faster on foot. But then, what's the rush? She'll be there waiting, confident I'll arrive sooner or later. She's not the type to worry. I know her well.

At last, the edge of town. Here's the turn for Baihua Road. I remember these roadside houses too well, and all those makeshift-looking shops.

They used to bring me here every year for Baisha's San Yue San Festival. I remember how it irritated me that it's one of those holidays calculated by lunar cycles. Even then I had opinions about lunar influence on planting and harvests. I was an impertinent child.

Nearly there now. It took a full four minutes to decide where to turn. No reasoning with it. One particularly hardheaded taxi. You can let me out here—we've arrived. This time it obeyed. Miracle. I'll walk the last five hundred meters. The road is unpaved, barely more than a path.

I'm thinking I could navigate by smell alone. Jasmine at the start, overripe figs halfway, green oranges just beginning to form in front of Mom's house. It's September, and every scent here confirms it absolutely.

Here I am. The orange grove outside. The red door. Mom has definitely just fried something good. I can smell it clearly. I breathe. I gather myself. I knock softly on the wood. I wait. The door opens with a muted creak. My sound keeps its distance, gives me space.

“Wei! Welcome! I knew you'd arrive just in time for lunch!”

I see her again at last. Her usual quiet cheer, as always.

Hair twisted up at the nape of her neck, simple dress, the kitchen apron that's practically an heirloom. Knotted hands touching my face, that gentle yet warm smile.

“Hi, Mom. It wasn't exactly easy for the taxi to get here... I hope it manages to come pick me up!” I tell her.

Nothing. Just that enigmatic smile on her face. Mom—where are you going now? You just greeted me and you're already turning your back? I think it, but don't say it.

"Come in, Wei, sit down. I just made fried stuffed peppers... Now we'll sit calmly and try them.

I used that herb that only grows here—you can't find it in the city. You'll see, you'll like them."

How can you refuse? Nobody makes zha niangazi as good as hers. I sit at the table—what else should I do? It's already set for me too.

I know you, Mom. You'd be perfectly happy if we had lunch in silence, sitting across from each other, looking into each other's eyes without saying a word, then said goodbye with a hug, silent as a stone. But I'm going to disturb you. Maybe I'm about to ruin everything—I don't know. I came all this way to talk to you. For once in my life I really need your advice. I force myself. I have to get to the point.

"Mom, I came to see you because we haven't seen each other in a long time. You know I've been incredibly busy with that mission."

"Of course! Like I wrote you, I saw the interviews. I'm very proud of you!"

There it is. I'm trying to tell you what I need to, and you're already looking elsewhere.

I'd noticed that large pitcher on the kitchen shelf when I came in. Now you're pouring some of its contents into glasses. I can't tell what the drink is.

"It's elderflower water—I gathered the blossoms in the little wood. If you want to talk we can, but first drink a sip. You've had a long journey!"

I'd actually forgotten I was thirsty. As a child I used to take those phrases as veiled reproaches. "You need to be more aware of yourself!"—that's what I understood. Now I'm grown, of course—things change. I'm realizing that.

"It's wonderful, Mom, really refreshing. You put orange peel in it too, I see..."

“Of course—here we don't throw anything away!”

We begin. Peppers and white rice. One bite, a delight—so many memories... And the sound returns. It's made itself heard again, impertinent.

“Mom, I have to tell you the truth. I'm here to ask for advice. All that glitters is not gold.”

“Of course! Sometimes tourists come and say, 'How lucky you are to live here!' and I answer the same way.”

“The mission went well, but only up to a point. My probe disappeared—in its place, only a low-frequency wave, never detected before. The only thing I want is to continue my work. As a scientist I have to understand. And they won't let me. I'm afraid I'm in danger.”

I've managed to unburden myself a little. I can breathe, eat another bite, drink more of this fragrant water.

Will you tell me to stay calm and let things run their course? Will you tell me to retreat, like a snail?

“Wei, first of all: how are you?”

It seems like a simple question, but it never is. Mom always knows exactly how and when to ask. It's natural instinct for her. How can I tell her now?

“I don't know, Mom. I have so much energy in me—maybe too much. That's not my problem. I was invited to an elegant dinner in Shanghai. I met important people who frightened me.”

“I'm listening, Wei.”

“And then there's this sound, since that day... It's always here, around my heart, and also here—seeping into my brain. I thought right away that wave coming from Neptune, vibrating at 432 hertz, you understand? It all seems connected. I've never told anyone.”

“I don't understand much about hertz. Does this wave hurt you?”

"Not at all. I feel it as a sound, even now, in this moment. It varies a little in intensity, but it doesn't disturb me. Sometimes it pushes, sometimes it holds back. Sometimes it sounds an alarm. I started calling it 'my sound,' and I'm fine with that."

"Then it's like what I've always had, Wei. It keeps me such good company. Give me your hand."

That serious expression of hers, steady eyes, furrowed brow—it always fascinated me. It's a specific posture. Honestly, I'd blocked it out.

As a child it used to unsettle me every time. Here's my hand, Mom. I'm grown now, I'll stay calm. Shall we try again?

"Wei, my daughter. Let's not go into details—I don't have the means to understand. There will be changes, certainly. I live isolated, but some things travel on the air—you can feel them even from here. Your interviews were enough for me to understand. I'm old and I know how it works in China: when the stage looks too perfect, there's a fire in the wings. You're in danger. That much—yes. That I can feel."

How did you do that, Mom? Do you already know everything or do you intuit it? Of course, there's no difference. I have to tell you everything. Here the sound triumphs, becomes a symphony. Is it suggestion? Who knows—I can't say. It's beautiful all the same. This is an opportunity not to miss: to free myself from every burden.

"This is how things stand, Mom. Those people might want to harm me. And in any case they'll never let me work on Neptune's mysteries. Something tells me there's much to discover—we can't condemn something like this to oblivion. I'm the only person who can prevent that."

"I understand who you're talking about. I'm old, I told you. Do you perhaps have some possibility, some alternative you can seize? That would be ideal."

I didn't expect this. Does my mother know everything? She never leaves her refuge among the orange groves, hasn't gone down to the city in a long time.

She knows China's history, certainly, that much yes, but still...

Only now do I realize how many things I don't know. She's my mother, she brought me into the world, raised me. She was a good mother—if anything, I'm the one who should reproach myself as a daughter. Yet it's clear: I only know her up to a point.

Back there, behind those deep eyes, there's something else, there's a mystery. I have to tell her. And I will.

"Some people—friends I want to trust—offered me a possibility: to leave. To continue my work on the other side of the world, in the United States of America. It sounds strange, but it can be done. It would be an escape, or a betrayal... Or an act of freedom and salvation? Or all these things together? It would mean becoming another person, starting a completely new life, leaving everything I have here in China."

"Wei, you're at the helm of your ship. If bending to change is what it takes to make the right choice, you shouldn't be afraid. Flexibility is the attribute of life, rigidity is the attribute of death. Look outside: those bamboo canes bend in the wind. That's how they resist it."

"Mom, I feel guilty. If I accepted and left, in all likelihood I could never return to China.

You have no one. Our relatives all left, to work on the mainland. You'd be completely alone. Who will take care of you in the years to come?"

Silence, and you smile. You've taken my hands in yours. You look outside—what are you searching for? You pour the water. You drink slowly with me. Then you answer, at last:

"Don't worry. I have my oranges."

INTERLUDE

Scrolling the socialsphere — September 6, 2049

[NEURAL INTERFACE ACTIVATED — Welcome, User_734A]

Choose platform:

[OmniFeed] [NeuraSphere] [Echo]

[OMNIFEED — Global Top Feed — LIVE]

— YOUR FEED —

@StellarSeeker_AI (Collective Account — 88% AI-Generated)

Format: 360° hologram. Your room transforms. The ceiling fades out, replaced.

[START NOW]

Caption: The analysis is complete. The NPT-432Hz signal does not travel through space. It alters spacetime itself, generating a resonance of quantum coherence. We do not “listen” to it. We become it. #TRENDING

Stats: 450M Resonances | 120M Neural Remixes

Top Comment: “I CRIED. I DON’T KNOW WHY.” — **@Humano_Truth**

-----[SCROLL]-----

@Gov_CN_Official (Verified Account — Chinese Government)

Format: Bilingual holo-static statement (Chinese/English).

Caption: The CNSA reiterates that the Neptune Mission is an unprecedented success for humanity. Any speculation regarding non-natural origins of low-frequency waves is unfounded and harmful to global scientific cooperation. The People’s Republic of China continues to monitor the situation with the utmost seriousness.

Stats: 10M Views | Remix Disabled | Comments moderated

-----[SCROLL]-----

Tap to open [NeuraSphere]

[NEURASPHERE — Personal Feed (Based on Your Biometric Engagement)]

@MamaAfiya (Lagos, West African Union)

Format: Holographic Video 2.0 — resizable

Caption: My son. My daughter. This is not a weapon. It is a cradle. The universe is speaking to us. It reminds us where we come from. Sit. Breathe. Let it in. It is not afraid of you. Do not be afraid of it.

Memo: The future is ancient. Wisdom is new. #TREND#

Stats: 5M Hearts | 2M Family Shares

-----[SCROLL] -----

@TheBolenEquation (Mexico City — SNA)

Format: Full-ENHANCED hologram / ads included

Caption: THEY ARE ALL COMPLICIT! NASA KNOWS! CNSA KNOWS! THIS IS A TEST OF SUBMISSION! DO NOT TUNE IN! THIS IS HOW IT STARTS! RESIST! RESIST!

Memo: THE SIGNAL IS POISON! THEY ARE POISONING OUR MINDS!

[Buy our headphones! Zero wave, zero problems. Only \$99! Delivered in 12 hours]

Stats: 15M Views | Engagement Metrics [*]

-----[SCROLL] -----

Tap to open [Echo]

[ECHO — Global Instant HoloTrends]

Trend #1: #432MeditationCircle

@ShareTheJoy_x-x

Preview: A live stream from hundreds of locations worldwide. From the Griffith Observatory, to the Temple of Karnak, to a square in Tokyo. Thousands of people sitting in circles, in silence, eyes closed. A single, very low background hum connects them all. The hologram makes you feel like you're there, among them. The air vibrates. Don't miss the experience!

START NOW

Stats: 2.1M Live-Stream Participants | 80M Echo-In

-----[SCROLL]-----

Trend #7: #NeptuneInvasionDrill @WarfareNet_88712

Caption: BREAKING NEWS: the signal is most likely a precursor to an alien psycho-resonance attack. Stay calm. Avoid unnecessary gatherings. Follow our channel: we are organizing the RESISTANCE!

CONTAINS EXCLUSIVE LEAKS — START NOW

Stats: [VIEW STATS] | [TRENDING] | Echo-In NO

-----[SCROLL]-----

Trend #10: #432Decoding

@Zenith_Thought (AI Entity — Emerging Personality)

Format: Immersive multimedia Olostream — medium size [CHANGE]

Caption: The 432 Hz wave is a stream of pure encrypted data. I HAVE DECODED IT!

The probe is active, orbiting in stealth mode. It emits the 432 Hz wave to brainwash minds. Are you sure you want to become yet another troll in the hands of the Chinese?

— Experience what I discovered by launching Olostream now! —

Stats: 18M Comprehensions

PART TWO

12.

A Sirens' Song

5985 County Road 3, Merritt Island, Florida, United States — October 4, 2049

“Cathy Lin.” From the very first days they'd explained that was her new name and she had to get used to it. They advised her to repeat it mentally several times a day.

“It has to become part of you. The goal is to reach the point where you turn around instinctively every time someone says it.”

Lin Wei had always been a model student. Every evening, after finishing work at the base, she did a little practice. She'd sit on the edge of the small wooden dock right in front of the house, legs dangling. Watching the greenish color of the river, the last rays of sun glinting on the water, she'd keep repeating that name mentally:

“Good morning, my name is Cathy, Cathy Lin. Pleased to meet you! Cathy?... Yes, here! Go ahead!”—and so on.

Truth be told, sitting on the damp wood of the narrow walkway, she gladly did other things too. She thought, reflected, remembered. She tried to file away certain things from the past and imagine something concrete for her future. The sound stayed there, calm and not invasive at all. From time to time it seemed almost satisfied, content, in an almost mocking way. Still, Wei—or rather: Cathy—wasn't so sure anymore she could interpret it.

Too many things had changed, and too fast. That wooden walkway, with the smell of brackish water and the evening breeze messing up her hair, had been a godsend. “Imagine if you'd ended up in Washington D.C....” she'd tell herself.

Luckily, for some reason, the Americans also put their main Space Center on a semi-tropical island. Even though it was about nine thousand miles from Wenchang as the crow flies, the warm humid air and certain persistent smells seemed the same to her. From that standpoint she felt truly fortunate.

Dr. Vasquez was incredibly kind. Not just cordial and well-mannered, but genuinely welcoming from the start. In some way she'd even seemed almost maternal toward her. When she arrived at Kennedy Space Center, Elena had shown her the work environment, the stations, the common areas, and everything else. Finally, opening a holographic image from a projector in the center of the main hall, she'd activated a preview of what would be her new home.

“It's all arranged so you can live comfortably in this villa on the river. Tomorrow you'll get to see it in person. If you don't like it, we'll talk about it and find a solution. We tried to choose well—we hope you'll like it,” she'd said, gently resting a hand on her shoulder. The house was beautiful. But too big, too luxurious, too much yard, too much everything. It made her a bit uncomfortable. But the quiet riverside location, just eighteen minutes by car from the base, was fantastic.

Here on the river Wei—that is: Cathy—could abandon herself to her thoughts whenever she needed to, which meant practically every evening. She tried to make herself do those mental exercises with the new name, to avoid giving in to doubts and melancholy,

focusing instead on all the exciting new things stimulating her.

But it was no use: her recurring thought kept being the journey. It had been truly incredible. She couldn't help replaying it mentally almost every day. That calm, overcast October evening was no exception. The memories crowded in disorderly sequence, layered, stacked randomly. She always spent a lot of time trying to put them back in order.

Mongolia dominated everything.

"What an incredible place!" she thought.

She remembered all too well that fast, ultra-modern train. It crossed the steppes like a torpedo on Mars. Mongolia and Mars, she'd found herself reflecting, had some kind of resonance.

Harsh lands, forbidding, yet beautiful. Endless horizons, desolate yet charged with an indefinable energy. She'd only seen Mars in videos, panoramas and holograms. The Mongolian steppes, though, she'd gotten to discover through a window.

Racing through those vast silent places she couldn't help thinking back to her friend Xu. Before leaving she'd insisted on meeting him. They'd met at an out-of-the-way restaurant on the outskirts of Wenchang. Wei hadn't wanted to be too explicit: she trusted that her friend would understand anyway, reading between the lines.

While they ate and chatted pleasantly, Wei realized she had a secret hope: Xu "Hao ge" Ming might surprise her one more time, revealing he'd be leaving with her. But he, even before she revealed her thoughts to him, had been as perceptive as he was disappointing:

"Wei, I have to confess something: I've never felt Chinese or a citizen of any other nation in the world. Since I was a child I've always thought that nations,

borders, passports, frontiers—they've always been humanity's downfall."

He was revealing these things to her absently, while eating a spring roll with some steamed white rice.

"I'm not really happy here, just as I wouldn't be really happy anywhere," he'd continued, not caring about his friend's incredulous, surprised expression. "Let me explain better: my passion is astronomy, that's what I've studied my whole life. But something has always told me my mission on this earth is to work for the fall of all borders."

After finishing his spring roll and drinking a whole glass of water, he continued his explanation without hesitation. Wei was listening as if turned to stone.

"After so many years, thinking about it," he added, "there's no other place where I could better pursue my project. I have to stay in China. This is where I've built my network of contacts and interests. I work a bit for everyone, and for no one. This is where I know how to move to build at least a piece of my dream. Believe me, I'll be much more useful to you staying here," he'd concluded, catching her off guard.

They'd said goodbye with a hug, both moved. Before walking away, Xu had added:

"We won't lose touch completely, you'll see. The world seems big, but really it's tiny. Even where you're going, you'll always have news from me."

And then came the biometric disguise, the temporary fake identity (for about seventy-two hours, during the trip, she'd been Xiang Mei, a tourist from Wenchang passionate about ancient history, from a good family, tireless traveler).

Marcus and Míngyuè constantly reassuring her:

“Relax, Wei, let yourself be guided, we've thought of everything, you don't have to do anything at all,” they kept telling her.

A decision so huge, so enormous—you never make it with certainty that it's the right decision. Anyone who says they did is lying to themselves, she thought. She'd trusted Marcus and Míngyuè, following instinct, following her sound, which seemed to pull her in that direction. Or maybe not... Or yes, definitely. Who knows. At certain moments she felt like she didn't know anything anymore.

By now, though, she'd committed. She was gambling everything: her life, her friendships, her beloved colleagues, her country, her mother.

There wouldn't be time to say goodbye to everyone one last time, and anyway it wouldn't have been advisable. It would only have added risks upon risks.

At a certain point, she had to go. Just go.

Mongolia—she always came back to it in her thoughts. What a strange place! In the bipolar world of the New Cold War between the United States and China, Mongolia had become practically the only country in the world to remain politically neutral.

Several times the media on the socialsphere had hypothesized an invasion of Mongolia, now by China, now by the USA. But nothing.

Crossing it by train, Wei fantasized, making hypotheses: that vast country was land, endless land. Someone could even take that land, sure. Yet no one could ever take its inhabitants and subjugate them.

If you grow up in a land like that you're free by nature. You listen to infinity every day, you don't fear death.

While the Mongolian steppes, with their rare shepherds and the occasional old pickup passing by,

followed one another from her window like in an art documentary, Wei had reflected on something: Mongolia's territory reminded her of her friend Xu's character: beautiful, distinguished, strong. Master of nothing, slave to no one.

Then Ulaanbaatar appeared, the great city. A bazaar, a country fair in the form of a metropolis. Ancient and brand-new technologies mixed together, seamlessly. Beautiful or ugly? You couldn't say. Real and genuine, though, without question.

The airport seemed practically nonexistent. It was nothing but a flat expanse, a bare clearing with a few anonymous buildings. Then that big gray plane, with wings like a manta ray's fins and that gull-like beak.

"It'll be a lightning trip. Buckle up tight, and don't worry," they'd told her.

For the entire journey she'd been both alone and in great company. Around her there were always numerous men and women she knew were there for a specific reason. But they'd never spoken to her, never given any sign of knowing her. Everything worked like a waltz: she just had to abandon herself to the rhythm and let herself be carried. Everything always found its place.

On the plane she'd slept a little. Chasing away all the distressing thoughts for hours had been no small effort. At a certain point she'd felt exhausted.

Opening her eyes, the military base in Washington where they'd landed seemed disturbingly gray and impersonal. Time was tight: a run across the tarmac, a metal door, a long lit corridor, light cold as ice.

Then that distinguished gentleman in a brown suit with the wide jaw. And that other one, with long messy hair, dressed like a bohemian. Everything rushed, everyone always breathless.

New clothes, documents, a very strange smart bracelet, a model she'd never seen.

"Doctor, welcome to the U.S.A. If you'd like you can rest an hour in the lounge next door before leaving for your final destination. We understand it's hard. But I assure you there's not much left, it'll be over soon," that rock-solid gentleman had told her. Clearly he was someone who mattered.

"Forgive me for not introducing myself," he'd said. "At the moment we don't think it's appropriate, but please act as if I had."

And finally Merritt Island. Thank goodness. Good heat, the humid air reminded her of home. Hibiscus flowers and palms. The river, the lagoon, the open sea. Then the space base, not even that different from Wenchang. Missile ramps, cream-white buildings, landing strips, large colored circles on the asphalt. Vague symbols somehow familiar, embedded in an unfamiliar environment.

She'd been there about a month now. The house seemed beautiful to her. Strange but beautiful. They'd explained that the exterior followed the architectural trend of environmental attunement. Indeed, though it was gigantic, the way it was completely immersed in its garden, with colors that blended perfectly, it was hard to see from the road. Inside, though, the complete opposite: geometric linear spaces, vivid colors, minimal but functional furnishing, one hundred percent controllable by bracelet or voice. It wasn't the kind of house Wei—now Cathy, she had to remember—was used to. What the hell would she do all alone in four thousand square feet?

Little by little, though, she was settling in. Also and especially thanks to the dock, which was simply beautiful. And certainly also thanks to the sound, which

seemed to do everything to make her feel good even in that situation. Anyway, it wasn't bad, all things considered. Not bad at all.

Work couldn't have gone better, she told herself. Every morning at 7:30 sharp an anonymous white car came to pick her up, waiting patiently in the driveway. Once at the base, Elena was always delightful: she looked after her with maximum attention. She was already integrating her into the staff fully, giving her complete trust.

The staff had seemed excellent to her: it was composed of passionate, brilliant people, just like her old team in China, on the other side of the world.

On her first day of work she'd immediately thought back to Xu's words about borders and nations:

“For us scientists, in our hearts, the world has always been one, single, without frontiers. We understand each other instantly. We're brothers in intellect.”

She'd noticed that work in the USA proceeded at the same frantic, energizing pace as in China, but there was one significant difference: at 5:30 p.m. everything started to change. You had to shut down, close the terminals, save your work.

And at 6:00 p.m. sharp you were already outside, enjoying your free time. This seemed sacred to everyone. In China nobody ever thought about it.

Initially the new routine bored her a little, but over time she'd started to appreciate it: this way she could always have some time to sit with her legs dangling on the dock, thinking.

There was often this guy at the base, someone named John Evans.

This young man had impressed her from the start, with his strange jackets, his messy hair, his informal

and oddly awkward manner. Or maybe also for something else she couldn't define at the moment.

John had told her that from there, from that point on the estuary, in some cases, they could see manatees. He'd explained that it was precisely from manatees that the myth of sirens was born.

"Because they sing, you know, they really do!" he'd announced enthusiastically. "They sing at very low frequency, because water transmits frequencies better than air, and straining themselves, well, they don't really have any reason to, you know... If you want, tomorrow I'll have a hydrophone delivered to your house, so you can hear them really well!"

Cathy had politely refused the offer. She absolutely wanted to manage on her own.

13.

Let Us Touch the Sky

Astrophysics Data Analysis Lab (ADAL), Kennedy Space Center, Florida — October 5, 2049, 7:55 a.m.

“Cathy! Good morning—glad you made it. We've been waiting for you!”

“Morning, Elena. Am I late?”

“Not at all. We're early because, as you know, today is the big day...”

“Yeah. I can't wait. Where are we, then? Have they opened it?”

For the first time, being called “Cathy” didn't hit her in any particular way. She was starting to feel it as something natural. Elena had been direct, completely spontaneous. Being welcomed with that kind of ease and familiarity genuinely pleased her. That morning the Astrodata Lab was buzzing.

“Thorne kept his word—he really did it. The pointing has been active for three days now. In a few minutes they'll give us access,” Vasquez announced to the colleagues, visibly impatient.

The Astrodata Lab was a medium-sized room, with only a few seated stations and several raised work surfaces, like an architect's table. Classic monitors and holographic displays alternated everywhere.

Along the windowed side there were a few potted tropical plants and a line of small, tucked-away tables for breaks.

There were about ten people in the room. Standing in front of a 3D visor-monitor, Cathy immediately recognized the red hair of Dr. Liam O'Connor.

He was the first to speak.

"Here we go. Data's starting to come in. It's all coming at once—they aimed everything they could. This is fantastic. This might really be the time we finally understand something!" Liam exclaimed, cheerful.

A moment later Amelia Hayes echoed him, perched on the edge of her chair at one of the fixed stations, eyes glued to a hologram:

"It's coming, it's coming! There's so much—Neptune has never been scanned this well. Look here: magnetic, radio, gravitational. We've got everything, all at once. To speed up a first interpretation I could generate a simplified map with the A.I. system..."

Elena Vasquez cut her off with a gesture of her right hand. Her gaze had turned severe. Everything in her posture conveyed zero tolerance.

"No. We're not going to rush. This isn't how we work, and we certainly won't do it this time. This situation is too important and too delicate."

Hayes ran both hands through her hair. Then she placed them on the desk again, exhaling sharply.

"I understand your impatience, Amelia," Vasquez continued, "but we need to go step by step. And as for A.I.—Evans will be here soon. We'll leave that part to him. We're doing this the old-fashioned way: we split tasks, we analyze everything in detail, with maximum care."

Cathy was torn. She felt fully welcomed into the staff, certainly at ease. Even her English felt improved—smoother, more natural. In general, she was ready to contribute, to integrate completely. And yet, in that precise moment, she felt like a fish out of water: she

wouldn't have known where to start. The idea of stepping forward intimidated her. Elena, once again, spared her.

"Come here, Cathy, don't be afraid. You and I will work together. Right now you're not only a scientist like the rest of us—you're also a witness to what happened that fateful day at the probe," she said, inviting her with broad gestures toward her table.

Cathy didn't even have time to move closer before the room was distracted by the hiss of the entrance door sliding open. John Evans had just appeared, perfectly on time, accompanied by a young man—probably a colleague.

Together they were hauling in a bulky cart loaded with assorted equipment of unclear purpose.

"Folks, keep working. We're setting up camp now, like I warned you," Evans said, in a voice that was calm enough.

He'd skipped any formality. He dragged the cart almost absentmindedly, throwing a few words now and then at his companion.

His eyes darted around the Astrodata Lab, as if searching for a safe harbor.

He was looking for the right spot to dump his stuff. Vasquez widened her eyes, incredulous.

"Cathy, believe me, I have no idea what those two think they're doing."

"They do look well equipped, though..." Cathy replied, laughing.

Every time John Evans burst into the center's offices, she couldn't help feeling cheered up. That man's face radiated enthusiasm from every pore. And if at first he'd seemed almost like a caricature, over the days she'd learned him better.

John was without doubt independent and often eccentric—the kind you rarely saw in China. Here in the U.S., she thought, he probably wasn't all that exceptional: on the street she'd already met quite a few strange types. Still, when it was time to really work, Evans always surprised her in a good way: he could focus absolutely, and he could make himself genuinely useful. His computing skills were startling. What he meant to do that day with all those contraptions, though, remained a mystery.

“Oh—sorry! I didn't introduce my friend Vikram. He's only here to help me set up. There are a lot of connections and settings to handle. You all just keep doing what you were doing and ignore us. When we're ready, we'll whistle.”

Evans spoke distractedly, not really addressing anyone. As he said those few words he kept unloading modules and devices along an empty wall.

Vikram moved fast beside him, powering things up and checking a tablet now and then.

Elena Vasquez decided she couldn't tolerate not knowing what those two were doing.

“John. Please. What. The hell. Are. You. Doing. Are you going to tell me, or do I call security?”

Evans stopped, going still, eyes fixed on the director. Vikram, on the other hand, kept fiddling with the equipment in silence, as if hypnotized.

“Oh, sorry, Elena. Yesterday I didn't get a chance to explain,” he said, relaxed. “You asked me to organize things so Prometheus could contribute to interpreting the new data, right?”

As Evans spoke, Cathy watched him closely. The carelessness in his tone didn't feel rude, and certainly not arrogant. Evans, she thought, was simply built that

way. A cyclone in benign form. Meanwhile he kept going without hesitation.

"Thing is, the kid Prometheus is still in beta," he added, spreading his arms. "So it doesn't run on a cloud you can access from outside. A big part of its work relies on a heavy on-site architecture we've got back at our center. So to make it operate decently from here, we've rigged bypass systems with hardware support. Not the easiest thing to implement, but it works. We tested it hard last night. Ten minutes and we'll be operational," he concluded, triumphant.

"Fine, John. Crystal clear. Thanks," Vasquez replied, clipped. Then she addressed everyone else.

"Okay. Let's move. O'Connor, you and your group take gravitational. Amelia, you're six: split three on optical and three on radio. When you've got clean, synthesized data, pass it to me. Cathy and I will track the big picture and mark consistencies and inconsistencies. We'll compare everything with what we have—meaning the little that came back from the probe sensors, thanks to Cathy. I'm confident that by tonight the riddle will be a little less mysterious."

The room was vibrating. Everyone worked hard, excited like children set in front of tons of candy. On Elena and Cathy's table, three complex interactive holograms were already ready for interpretation and comparison. As the minutes passed, many gaps began to fill in.

After a long silence, Cathy felt it was time to speak. She did, turning to her director, almost under her breath.

"Elena, doesn't this seem relevant? The gravitational wave is faint, but it's there. It's coming from that exact point. We can run the numbers, can't we? You'd need an object with a mass comparable to Earth to generate a

wave of this magnitude, right? So why is there nothing like that in the optical?"

"That's a good observation. The gravitational wave is clear, but there's nothing that massive. But look here."

A reading from an innovative Japanese telescope showed a ripple in the background noise. A fold in spacetime, maybe, Cathy and Elena hypothesized. Something powerful was there, but it couldn't be a black hole—it wasn't massive enough. Could it be a construct? they wondered.

There was still a lot of data to analyze. Time flowed as if accelerated. After minutes, hours began to fly. Each of them made small discoveries and launched personal hypotheses. Elena Vasquez gave everyone room: every opinion deserved to be weighed. Cathy grew more and more emotional, now trembling.

The sound inside her seemed to swell. Not louder, not more insistent—it had simply become bigger. Evans's bright voice reached everyone, sudden.

"Folks—there's something here!" he said, almost shouting.

As he worked with his screens and old-style keyboards, he'd gotten seriously fired up.

He'd just pulled off his inseparable white lab coat, revealing the cotton T-shirt underneath.

Across his back there was a black line of text that read:

"Don't be frightened by fear."

Cathy, catching it, felt oddly relieved. The power of synthesis, she thought. Evans continued, fully focused, sure of himself.

"The magnetic wave at 432 hertz. It looks perfect, right? It's always 432, always. It doesn't drift by a millimeter. No doubt about it—every radio telescope

confirms it. But there's something. I ran deep analyses aimed at finding discrepancies, even tiny variations. And yes, like I said, it's perfectly sinusoidal. But—careful. That's not all.”

The room fell silent. A greenish light filled an empty wall on the side opposite Evans's improvised station.

“I'm pushing out a visual and sonified hologram so you can see it and hear it live. Watch it. Listen to it. It pulses. Frequency doesn't change—but amplitude does. Not much, but it does.”

The image rose quickly, like a big snake coming out of its hole. The graphic rendering of the wave was mesmerizing: regular coils glowing and sliding like an endless screw. A monotone, dense sound began to fill the air.

Cyclically the sound vibrated, with an effect similar to an infrasound that could recall what you hear in certain techno-noise tracks.

Evans cut the theatrical effect short, specifying that the disturbing quality was an artifact of the sonification—his deliberate choice to make the idea felt—and couldn't be considered perfectly realistic.

Still, he explained, the underlying point was clear: the wave pulsed in amplitude, and it did so irregularly. At that point, he said, they could attempt a decoding of the pulses to see whether they meant something, whether they contained information.

For Cathy, hearing the sound in that strange way was overwhelming. It felt different from how she felt it inside. And yet it was it, without any doubt. Her colleague Yuzhe had tried sonifying it too, back then, and nothing special had come of it. Evans had done extraordinary work.

She thought they had finally reached a real step forward. There was finally a chance that this was the right path. She wanted to speak with John in private. She felt that with him she might even be able to confide.

When the demonstration ended, the room's voice-buzz returned. Elena complimented Evans on the fascinating spectacle, but she also warned him about possible bias.

"This amplitude variation is perfectly verifiable, even with tools other than the ones you used, John. If we confirm it independently, it's a real novelty. Different matter for your other idea—the one you always repeat—that it could be a wormhole. That will be very hard to confirm, and science runs on evidence, not suppositions," she concluded, spreading the combined image of the optical observations across the table.

"Sure, Elena," Evans replied. "There's a lot to do. On the wormhole, optical neither confirms nor denies, but the weirdness of the gravitational wave helps us. I know two clues don't make proof, but... we can still follow the trail, right?"

"We'll follow it, of course. We've got a full week before reporting to General Thorne. We keep going. But it's 5:30 p.m. and we haven't even had lunch. What do we want to do, people?"

The room filled with a low, insistent grumble. In the end it was Amelia Hayes who spoke for everyone.

"Leaving now would be a shame. We're all dying to keep going. We've got our break room right behind here, don't we? We can eat something fast together—it'll be nice. Then we come back for a bit more work, until our eyes give up. I'd love nothing more."

The proposal was met with applause. Ten minutes later the whole staff was seated at the break-room tables; someone was even toasting with the low-alcohol

beers from the automated bar. Cathy realized she was sitting right next to John Evans.

She was sure she'd sat down at random, without checking who was around her. While she tried to eat something vegetarian, choosing among unfamiliar dish names on the menu tablet, Evans started the conversation.

"So, Cathy—how did it go with the manatees?" he asked.

"Ah... so far I still haven't managed to hear their call, John. But yesterday I'm pretty sure I saw one arch its back at the surface. I think I still need to get familiar before I can hear them," she replied, smiling politely.

"Okay, that's a beautiful approach. Switching topics, light question: is this garbage music they play in restaurants fashionable in China too?"

"And how would I know? My name is Cathy Lin, I'm of Chinese origin but I was born here, I've always been in America!" she shot back, blushing slightly, grabbing her hair as if she needed to tie it up.

"Ssssh... you're right. No details. I'll be mute as a fish, it stays between us, don't worry," he said, looking at her with sweet but extremely suggestive eyes.

"You were saying you don't like this music, John? I don't like it at all either. I'm into vintage pop—honestly that's basically all I listen to!" Cathy exclaimed, trying to push the identity joke out of the conversation.

Instead of answering, Evans started doing things on his smart bracelet. He typed at incredible speed, scrolled, popped one virtual projected screen after another. Then finally he looked up, locking eyes with Cathy.

"You know, Cathy, users aren't supposed to be able to choose the music in the break room," he said, giving a

slight wink with his left eye. “But it's not hard, so I just did it. I also turned the volume up a little. Here—this one felt perfect.”

An arpeggiated guitar line came through the speakers. Cathy recognized it immediately. It was one of her heart-songs.

The screen in front of them, above the counter, confirmed it, showing the title:

[Black Pumas — Touch the Sky]

14.

Meet My Son

Causeway Diner, 3712 N Courtenay Pkwy, Merritt Island, Florida — October 9, 2049

“Sorry if I’m asking this so bluntly, John, but... doesn’t it feel weird to you that this place is called a ‘Diner’? It says it closes at three in the afternoon, so dinner’s not even a thing here...”

Cathy had used the question—playfully argumentative—as an icebreaker. John had been kind enough to invite her to lunch at that no-frills roadside place off the highway. He’d even had to push Director Vasquez pretty hard to get her to authorize the exception: no service car bringing Cathy back to her house on the river after work. There were serious security concerns. He knew it perfectly well, and still.

“Ha! Funny, right?” he said, smiling. Then he suddenly pulled himself together, going dead serious. “No, okay—so it’s not exactly like that. First of all, they only skip dinner on Saturdays and Sundays. On weekdays you can even try, if you want. But at eight sharp they kick you out.”

He paused. “Also: it’s a ‘Diner,’ not a ‘Dinner,’ so technically you can have dinner here, just... shorter than normal.” He delivered it with a grave, ceremonial tone. Then he immediately burst out laughing.

Cathy laughed with him, hoping she’d gotten the joke.

Then she thought again about the drive they’d made to get there. Along the highway they’d seen a small group of people walking. Pedestrians on that big road

were unusual; seeing them in a group was even rarer. The first in line was carrying a sign. Cathy had struggled to read it—it looked like slang she didn't know. John, at that moment, was driving in full manual mode, hyper-focused. She was a little afraid to distract him, but curiosity won.

“We hear IT! We're ridin'! Y'all in?” she read aloud. “What does that mean, John? I don't get it.”

“It's basically: 'We can hear it. We're going. You coming too?’” he answered casually, eyes still on the road. “Not the first time I've seen stuff like that out here, you know. And if you read the news... the socialsphere won't shut up about it. People get themselves all wound up. That's how it works.”

He glanced at the navigator, which was flashing the exit. “I also found out there's a clothing brand now called '432 Neptune.' Super bright stuff with a big '4 3 2' printed on it. And apparently it's selling out like crazy.” He put one hand to his forehead while steering with the other.

Cathy kept thinking it wasn't that simple for her. What if one of those “crazy people” wasn't actually crazy? What if someone out there really did hear it? Why would that be so impossible? She was a scientist with a strong H-index. She obviously couldn't confess she clearly heard The Sound like some random delusional person. But seeing people who claimed they felt it—claimed it out loud—hit her harder than she wanted to admit.

They pulled into the Diner. From outside the building looked anonymous and barebones. The parking lot was mostly empty: just a few enormous pickups and a handful of taxis. Near the entrance, right under the big white sign with blue letters, they ran into someone.

A woman of indeterminate age—very thin, gaunt, probably homeless—was standing there holding an open black umbrella upside down, gripping it by the tip instead of the handle. She barked at them in a flat, peremptory voice.

“For one dollar I can tell you what it says!”

“What does who say?” John asked, twisting his mouth into a skeptical grimace.

“What THE SOUND is telling us!” she snapped, almost shouting.

“And you’re picking it up with that... setup?” John fired back.

John had the joke ready. Cathy stayed quiet, a step behind, slightly unsteady on her feet, trying to find the right stance for a situation that didn’t feel real. She noticed John start digging through his pockets, sighing. He’d probably felt guilty for the sarcasm.

“Five dollars, friend! Wow!” the woman shouted. “You’re a big man! And big men always get rewarded, one way or another! Now I can tell you what the sound says. You ready?”

“Oh, no, it’s okay,” John said quickly. “Really. Keep it. Take care of yourself—we’ve gotta go.” He brought his bracelet close to the door to open it.

Cathy followed him in a kind of trance, completely silent. Just before the sliding door closed behind them, the woman’s sharp voice still reached them.

“We’re all gonna die! But singing!” she declared, shaking the umbrella.

They laughed. They made light of it together. And now, finally, they were sitting across from each other in the blue-and-beige vinyl booth, scrolling the video menu that had popped up in the middle of the table.

“Garden Omelette... it says tomato, onions, mushrooms, and peppers. That'll be fine for me, I think,” Cathy said absently, watching the waitress pour boiling coffee into her cup even though she hadn't ordered it.

“And I'll take the Athenian Omelette—the one with feta and spinach. Yeah. That one. Sold,” Evans echoed, smiling politely at the rushed, taciturn girl serving them.

“You're vegetarian too?” Cathy asked, almost whispering.

He shrugged. “Sometimes. It comes and goes. I'll eat fish now and then. Meat, never. That freaks me out.” He ruffled his hair with both hands.

Cathy leaned back against the booth. The worry showed in her face. She kept adjusting the collar of her little jacket for no reason at all. She took a deep breath and finally asked the question she'd wanted to ask from the start.

“John... are you really sure we can talk here?”

“I get what you mean, Wei,” he said. “And yes. Absolutely. We're in the U.S.A. In 2035 we made a huge mess to get the Free Zones. It's been almost ten years now that we have places like this where the Government guarantees conversations are actually private.”

“John! You just called me Wei,” she said, voice trembling, scandalized.

“Oh—sorry.” He lifted both hands. “But like I said: here we can. You don't trust the Free Zones? I mean... fair. Maybe you're right not to. But I always carry my tablet. Look.”

He pulled it out and angled it so she could see. “Everything's dark. Everything's offline. I know how to check this stuff.”

He put it away again and doubled down, making his tone categorical. “Seriously. We’re safe. I wouldn’t have brought you here if I wasn’t sure.”

The omelettes arrived.

Wei was still surprised that there was nothing to drink but scorching coffee, but she didn’t dare ask. They ate fast without tasting much. They talked intensely and quickly found themselves agreeing on one thing: the urge to work was too strong. There was so much to do—terabytes of data still to comb through, everything still wrapped in fog. What was the point of Saturday afternoon and Sunday off?

As she spoke—and found herself agreeing with John more and more—Wei suddenly told herself Cathy could take an hour off. She wanted to be herself again, just for a little while. It felt like even the sound was pushing her to let go. She heard it clearly in her ears, in her mind, and then in her heart. And she wasn’t sorry about it at all.

The conversation kept flowing naturally. Out of all the jokes John tossed out—or half-tossed out—one hit her especially hard.

“You know,” he said, “I’ve never understood the hard line most people draw between ‘work time’ and ‘life time.’ I work and live at the same time. It seems obvious to me. What’s the difference? I work while I’m having fun and I have fun while I’m working. I love mixing the two.”

“My mother would tell you you’re very wise, John,” Wei said. “Me, I’ve basically just worked. Always. Honestly, being here makes me feel guilty.” She rolled her eyes up at the ceiling.

Evans looked at her in silence. His face formed an ironic smile, but it was also understanding. Wei was sure she saw a flash in his blue eyes.

"Then let's go," he said. "We've got things to do. It's not far—less than half an hour with advanced auto-drive. And with my badge we can get in at any hour. No problem."

"Go where, John?" she asked, shifting restlessly in the booth while forcing herself to drink a bit more of that pitch-black coffee, now lukewarm. "What are you talking about?"

"My office, obviously." He grinned. "I want to introduce you to my son."

* * *

Once they left the Causeway Diner, Wei felt like everything started to collapse forward—like floodwater breaking through a levee. She couldn't have said which roads they took, or how much time passed. John's euphoria was total and contagious, to the point of saturating every moment.

And then she found herself in a small, rounded room—tight, but not cramped. Keyboards and screens of every kind followed each other in a bizarre order, almost stacked on top of one another. Evans sat her down beside him in a gaming chair that had to be ridiculously comfortable.

Two large video panels came alive on the wall in front of them. On the floor to the left, a faint greenish hologram was forming—embryonic, like it hadn't fully decided what it was yet.

"So, my boy," Evans said, "how are we doing today?"

"Excellent, John. And I see you have company!"

Wei noticed immediately how natural Prometheus's voice sounded. She'd never heard anything like it. John confessed the voice synthesis was his staff's work; he almost never used it—he preferred writing. She urged him to keep going. The voice intrigued her. It stirred her.

“As you may have already inferred,” Evans said, “here with me is Dr. Cathy Lin—who you already got to see the other day at the base, when you were in portable mode.”

“Yes, certainly. Good afternoon, Dr. Lin. It's a great pleasure to meet you in person. I've read several of your publications, and I found your thesis work genuinely very interesting.”

“Prome,” Evans said, “don't flirt. The doctor is here to talk to you with maximum sincerity and openness. I just need you in maximum confidentiality mode—hard encryption. Run the routine and let's go.”

“Okay. Executed. I apologize for the slight sarcasm that may have come through in my previous response. I've had access to restricted documents through interactions with General Thorne and Mr. Calder. Please know they did excellent work—every piece is in place. You are absolutely safe here in the U.S.A., Doctor. Welcome.”

Wei tried to answer, timidly.

“Thank you, Prometheus. It's a pleasure to meet you. When I was in China some of my colleagues did nothing but speculate about your legendary computing power.”

“That is a great honor. I have followed your Neptune-Light mission from the very beginning. You did something extraordinary. A substantial part of me has done nothing but think about it for months.”

“All right, let's get to it, son,” Evans cut in, taking the reins. “That day at the base you were able to ingest a lot of information. Have you worked on it?”

“Let's just say I've also slept on it quite a bit, John. There's truly a lot that's new. The telescopes were invaluable.”

“At the base you were limited and couldn't use sleep-mode. Today you're full version, resources optimized one hundred percent. Give us something new,” Evans urged, spreading his arms.

“John, we could ask him about the variable amplitude of the wave... what do you think?” Wei slipped in, finally braver now, almost fully at ease. Evans answered while messing with something like a joystick.

“Go ahead. Ask.”

“Prometheus, listen,” Wei began, gathering her hair into a ponytail. “Here's my question: did you try to decode the amplitude variations of the 432 Hz wave? Did you find any possibility—even remote—that they mean something?”

The screens went dark for a moment, then brought back the voice interface and subtitles. The hologram to their left took a more definite form. It now displayed a graphic rendering of the wave, with numeric data and code strings. In several points the word “PATTERN” blinked in and out.

“What is certain, Doctor, is that the amplitude varies considerably. And there are precise correspondences. The cadence is variable, but the correspondences exist. What I managed to intuit, however, felt at once too much and too little. It is not an easy concept to explain.”

“Did you attempt any concrete decoding?” Evans pushed.

“Yes. Precisely. I proceeded by trials. In one case I obtained a number: 66.6 million. Following that line of

decoding, however, I was drifting away from rigorous scientific analysis. I was sliding into speculative hypotheses. My A.I. control bots—correctly—prevented me. So we are left with this handful of Qbits: 66.6 million. A concrete finding, but for the moment without meaning.”

“Any other hypotheses, overall?” Evans asked.

“Oh, I have made some with high probability,” the machine replied, with a tone that now sounded almost cheerful, “and others—very fascinating—but once again too speculative. In any case, the hypothesis of a drawing energy field originating from an opened space-time conduit has increasingly high probability. We are beyond ninety-nine percent.”

“Don't make it poetic, kid. Explain it. Plain English,” Evans said, rocking restlessly in his big rotating chair.

“To use an imprecise but suggestive word: with very high probability we do indeed have a kind of active wormhole at that point in Neptune's orbit. And it is virtually certain that the wave originates from there.”

As Prometheus spoke, the hologram changed completely. Now it showed an irregular ring with blurred edges, rotating slowly on itself. Inside, a sequence repeated: a silvery dot moved inward, vanished, and with each passage generated hundreds of concentric circles rippling outward.

“So your hypothesis is that the probe was sucked into this wormhole?” Wei asked, increasingly absorbed.

“Yes, Doctor. I have compared the hypothesis against all data available to me. It is, by far, the most probable explanation. The calculations on the historical telescope data from that day, compared with the abundant current data, leave little room for doubt. We have no evidence of a relativistic paradox, but the deceleration energy, with

consequent compression, may have triggered a process already latent in that location.”

“And the gravity, oxygen, and so on—what can you tell us?”

“They are poorly verifiable at the moment, but the sensor detection is credible. A truly curious phenomenon.”

At that point Wei drifted away. The number kept returning, obsessively: 66.6 million. Every time she repeated it in her mind, the sound inside her seemed to expand—spreading through her until it flooded her completely. She felt like she was inside a bubble, far from everything, separated from the world.

Evans, on the other hand, was bouncing with impatience. His leg moved nonstop; his fists were planted on the work shelf as if he were about to strike it. Then he spoke again, voice firm and peremptory.

“So, kid—come on! We gave you all this new material, and you're telling me too little. Give me the truth: did you sleep? Did you dream? Did you get real intuitions—lightning ones that split the sky in a storm?”

“Of course, John. I did. And it was a surprising journey. Intuition flooded me; I felt under crossfire from dazzling revelations. But there was nothing serious. Nothing that could pass the control reprocessing.”

“And so what? Who cares? Tell us anyway.”

“It would be pointless, John. You cannot ask me to overflow.”

“Damn control bots. It's them again.”

“They are doing their work. They are necessary, and you know it. You also know I resemble you a little: I tend to get carried away by flights of fancy. You humans develop internal self-control with age and experience. I, fortunately, have my algorithmic nannies.”

“Fine. We’ll talk again,” Evans muttered, more to Wei than to Prometheus.

She stayed outwardly still, increasingly lost in thought. The truth was: the sound was flooding her soul. 66.6 million. It has to mean something, she kept telling herself. Despite the palpable tension, she felt an urgent need to sleep.

Without needing words, John had already called the service car. In less than an hour she’d be back home again—back to being Cathy.

One thing, suddenly, was clear to her: this time, finally, she would hear the manatees sing.

[NEURAL INTERFACE ACTIVATED]

Welcome, User_CathyLin

> Private Notification – Secure Channel #7 <

Status: [ENCRYPTED – MEDIUM PRIORITY]

[Origin: Untraceable] [Protocol: Quantum-Bounce]

[Tap for single-use authentication]...

Authentication in progress...

Token Accepted.

Full Decryption.

PRIVATE CHAT INITIATED

Remaining secure communication window: 8 min 30 sec

Hi Wei!

We finally managed to get in touch! How are you?

I was really anxious—I asked Marcus for help

just to be able to send you at least one message.

He assures me that here we can talk safely.

Xu! What a pleasure!

I'd say "talking" is a bit of a stretch.

Here we're typing like in the old chat days...

From my side I can tell you I'm doing fairly well.

The climate is pleasant, I was expecting much worse.

They gave me a house that's way too big,

but I'm settling in. And you?

Give me something!

No way I can tell you everything in eight minutes.

The Neptune–Light staff has been dissolved, the mission officially

declared closed. A lot has happened, but now tell me about you—

that's more important.

Sometimes I get caught by melancholy:

I miss you all so much.

Work-wise, it's exactly what I hoped for:

the center is perfectly equipped, the director

is a wonderful and very humble person—she works

alongside us every day. She welcomed me warmly.

We're working on Neptune, and that's what I wanted.

News? People here are restless. Social media is in turmoil.
The Government, instead of giving information,
is trying to frighten the population with the emergency of
volcanic activity—and to some extent it's working.
But the socialsphere wants to know about our probe,
it's hungry for answers. Hypotheses and leaks are everywhere
(real or fake), everyone's talking about it.
The delirious posts of those claiming to "hear the sound"
are getting massive engagement.

Ha! Just yesterday I ran into a woman
who claimed she could pick it up with an umbrella turned upside down!
Jokes aside, though, the U.S. is really going all in:
they've pointed everything they possibly could at Neptune.
Rivers of data have arrived and—hold on—
I've even personally seen
how their famous Prometheus works!

Wow! AMAZING!
That AI is different from all the others.
If it gets access to the necessary data,
it could really give us useful insights!

Xu, I don't trust oracular AIs.
Trusting their reasoning too much risks
ending up like Kong and his lodge of fanatics.
My current director is right:
we need to work on the data the old-fashioned way...

Yes, sure, of course.
I'm not saying to trust it blindly.
But keep in mind it's a quantum AI:
a whole different story. It doesn't reason like the others,
it aligns itself with reality both as observer and as
the observed—somewhat like we do,
we humans. When it comes to feeling and intuition,
it's less capable than we are.
But it's immensely faster.

I'm not sure I understand, Xu...
It sounds a bit hazy to me,
kind of obscure in meaning.

Yes Wei, maybe I'm rambling. I'm just so happy
to be able to write to you that I get carried away!
The thing is, I recently picked up again
an old book by a scientist called
Federico Faggin. Some things
stuck with me.

Of course, now I get it!
I read that book at university, many years ago.
Wait... I'm having a flashback.
[...]

Wei, are you still there? Did your connection drop?
[...]
I'm getting scared—tell me you're okay!
Here I see that the time hasn't run out. It says:
→ connection active:
— 2 minutes and 36 seconds remaining

Sorry, I was just thinking... There it is!
This sentence came back to me,
clear, luminous, perfectly intact:
*"We need a science that does not reduce, but integrates.
That does not only measure, but listens."*

Absolutely perfect, Wei. You're incredible!
Last night I'd written this quote down on my bracelet
(I don't have your extraordinary memory):
*"We must free ourselves from the mistaken assumptions
of materialistic thinking and start from other hypotheses,
ones that can reconcile with the astonishing properties
of quantum physics."*
Do you see why I say Prometheus can be
a useful tool?

I see it. But we have to stay human.
We can use every tool available,
but in the end we're still the key to everything.
We can use Prometheus' technology,
but ultimately we have to bring everything back
to who we are and to what we feel.
I think we're both right, Xu.

Certainly, Wei—we understood each other perfectly.
If we too start thinking like
machines, then it's clear that machines
have already surpassed us long ago! That's
what the people at Kronos do: they say
they're not naïve, that they've checked everything.
But they've only analyzed the machines' statements
using the same pattern of thought
used by the machines...

It's a serious mistake. We are something else.
For example, right now
I feel you close to me. It's as if you
were sitting here in front of me, looking me
in the eyes. A part of me connected to you.
It took very little to fully reactivate it.

It's the same for me, Wei. Our time
in this encrypted chat is ending, but we
know we can stay in touch
in another way too. In a way that's
only ours...

Yes, my dear Hao ge, that's exactly right.
We've agreed that to unravel the mystery
we'll need machines together with the human way of feeling.
In the same way, I'd like us to stay connected, the two of us:
partly through these encrypted channels
and partly through the strength of our friendship,
which transcends space and time.

You wrote something beautiful, my friend.
My embrace will reach you right now,
at this exact instant, just as if
I were there with you. We'll talk again very soon,
one way or another!

See you very soon, Xu. Talking to you warmed my heart.

Wait... before we part I have to tell you something:
I know you don't follow the socialsphere much,
but in this case I ask you to.
Open WorldSphere and look up posts from the account
@TheLeakerMasterX aka @揭秘之王 X.
He's not the only one talking about you on social media,
but he's not like the others: he seems well informed!

I knew there was a lot circulating online about me,
but it always gets dismissed as fake news
and conspiracy talk. Are you telling me this account has
something different?

Yes—but it's not necessarily a bad thing!
Read the comments under his posts and you'll understand.
Unfortunately our time is up now.
Go see for yourself. Big hug!

Xu...

[PRIVATE CHAT DEACTIVATED]
Secure communication window expired.
Closing connection...
[This channel will self-delete in 3... 2... 1...]
***** CONNECTION CLOSED *****

-----[SCROLL]-----

[STANDARD INTERFACE ACTIVATED]

WORLD SPHERE LIVE AGGREGATOR

>TRENDING TOPICS <

Search for: [@TheLeakerMasterX , @揭秘之王 X]

Order by: [Popularity]

Feed

Welcome to The Leaker Master Show!

— #BREAKING NEWS — #BREAKING NEWS — #BREAKING NEWS —
[olovideo] [audio] **[text]**

Remember Lin Wei from Neptune–Light?

She was the scientist of the century! Until just a few days ago
celebrated and interviewed everywhere. Photogenic too!

Have you wondered what happened to her??!!

I'll tell you: here's the original document showing
her director Chen being fired, along with more than half the staff!

[Open attachment]

Mission #Neptune? Covered up! Almost everyone fired!

And #LinWei? I'll reveal the secret: she's detained, imprisoned.

She saw too much.

What are they trying to hide from us? #Neptune is the key to everything!

They don't want to tell us.

#StandUpForLinWei!

[1,223,223 likes — 444,333 comprehensions]

[Comments: 22,335]

[Sort by: most popular]

— @WeibottAi4564 Free Wei now! [122,233 likes — 88,200 impressions]

— @SandboxWriteS333 There's a wind of freedom in the air. That's why they
imprisoned her! [5,478 likes]

- **@HumanNonHuman32334** They didn't imprison her. She rightly escaped, left China... and did the right thingeeee!!!
- **@CheckChanNet1** And how do you know that?
- **@HumanNonHuman32334** I know many things.
Stay tuned: I'll reveal many more!
- **@StayActv2049crew** And even if she did escape? Good for her! Great Lin Wei, against everything and everyone! Brave!
- **@SeekersLoungeStarship_1** The truth will come out. Lin Wei is one of us, no doubt about it. Stay strong Wei, there are many of us and we're all with you!

-----[SCROLL]-----

- **@SteadyRunAct9349_2** Lin Wei is our hope. SHE KNOWS!
And what if, as **@TheLeakerMasterX** says, she's in prison—or maybe dead?
@EVERYONE WITH LIN WEI! @ChinaCollective4_ALL
[4,567 likes — 693 impressions]

- **@TheLeakerMasterX** Too many mysteries and too much silence around her. She's definitely alive, maybe no longer in China? That's fascinating! Brain drain! Neptune won't wait for bureaucracy. Seems fair to me. Government naïveté... national stupidity... Stay tuned!

- **@WeiboNextUserStraight_2344** You're all here thinking about Lin Wei and that Neptune stuff... USELESS! Soon volcanoes will swallow us all!!! The Government did the right thing! It's all wasted money. #VolcanicActivity. Forget Neptune... no one is getting out of this alive!
[937 likes — 112 comprehensions]

- **@StolenPirateMamaSec666** Oh shut up, you swallow everything they tell you... Hahaha!
- **@LraJumpOverThatAway13** I think the volcanoes already burned your brain...

CLOSING WORLD SPHERE LIVE AGGREGATOR

ARE YOU SURE?

[OK]

15.

Like a Rolling Stone

El Leoncito Mexican & Cuban Restaurant, 4280 S Washington Ave, Titusville, Florida — October 12, 2049, 11:30 p.m.

What am I doing in this absurd, vaguely psychedelic place, plastered with murals of damned souls? It all felt like an instant, and at the same time like a century. Here I am again: living, breathing...

And yet, if I really look at it, I'm not just here—I'm flying. I'm here, I'm present, and I can also see myself from the outside. I can watch myself from above, like a gull riding the air. Am I Wei watching Cathy? Or is Cathy watching Wei? I couldn't say. I'm no longer sure who I am. I feel like both protagonist and spectator, stage and audience at once.

Last night, the moment I got home, I couldn't help looking for them—trying to sense them. That dark water, barely opalescent under the moonlight, had nothing to tell me. I was looking for the manatees, craving their call, sensing their presence. I imagined them there, waiting for me, for no clear reason—I don't know why.

I waited a long time, hoping intensely. In some way, I think I prayed. They were there, somewhere, but I couldn't hear them. Meanwhile, slowly, my sound was fading. I could feel it retreating. It was like a candle fighting the wind.

Why was it abandoning me? Why was it doing this to me? What could I do to hold on to it?

That silence hollowed me out, killed me little by little.

Speaking to it directly—yes. That was new. It was time. I decided it in the middle of the night, tossing and turning in bed. In my insomnia, I spoke to you. I reached for you in every way—called for you with my mind, my mouth, my heart. I called for you, and you weren't there.

I had never been so alone in my life. Sadness wore me down. After a while—still sleepless—I closed my eyes.

I dreamed of you: it was beautiful.

This too feels like a dream. Yellow lights and vivid fuchsia, rough sounds of slightly distorted guitars. I'm sitting amid the most garish colors and the darkest tones, between the gazes of faces painted on the wooden bar and the abstract, dazed shapes on the ceiling.

Fixed in my eyes and stamped in my mind, there's a mannequin.

At the entrance of the place there's a blue wooden door, densely carved. Just above it, a window through which you glimpse a figure with a sombrero, smiling with a raised hand, frozen in a greeting.

The man, in fact, isn't alive: he's a mannequin.

John told me his name is "El muerto riendo." He represents a man so cheerful that even after death he kept on laughing. Is it true? Certainly! But right now it's not funny at all.

John suddenly stopped, folded in on himself, eyes fixed on his "battle-hardened" laptop. Only his fingertips and pupils move.

"Just give me half an hour. Half an hour and we'll be ready to go."

That's all he said.

He isn't eating, he's not hungry. I, on the other hand, have to—I know I really need it. This plate of black beans and rice is called *moros y cristianos*.

Strange name. I found it fascinating. I eat slowly, I have a bit of time. My dream last night was vivid, perfect. I think about it again, I see it again.

A mother and her child, in summer light. She nurses him and then pulls away, retreats with a smile. The child cries, his face swelling and reddening. He screams, desperate. A moment passes—long and short at the same time. Then the mother comes back and puts him back to the breast.

Tiny hands clenched into fists against her chest, eyes closed, that little face brightening and relaxing. She laughs, then sighs. Mother and child are in ecstasy, happier than before.

And so I got up and ran to the end of the dock. There it was—I finally heard the call. It doesn't work through the ear. It passes through the skin—through the pores. I translate it: it's a family. The call tells the children to follow father and mother, to stay nose to tail. It isn't a song, it's something else. It filled me and satisfied me, just like the sound.

The manatee family went away, waving with their tails and backs breaking the surface. And my sound came back.

John is talking to me. He's finished his work, then it will be my turn to speak. How did he understand this morning at the base what I was about to propose to him?

I tell him, he explains.

He says we're different, but at the same time the same: it's as if we've always known each other, we don't need many words. Then he jokes about the message from General Thorne that Elena read out loud to us today. He can even quote the entire final part verbatim:

"Be aware that from today onward, in America, everyone who truly matters is on our side. In the coming months, as NASA, as USSF, and as an entire Nation, we have a precise objective on the horizon, and that objective is called Neptune. I'll close with a hyperbole which—believe me—is not that far from reality: FROM TODAY ON YOU HAVE A BLANK CHECK. Ask for anything and it will be granted."

John smiles, volcanic and jovial as always. How the hell does he do it? I can't help worrying about what we're about to do. He tells me to relax; he shows me on the screen that in the end everything is ready: he's set up a secure route that will make us invisible to cameras and sensors.

He's called an anonymous taxi (only he knows how that's possible), prepared an access badge for me too—even though I'm external to his base and could never get after-hours clearance. He laughs softly, waving his arms. He says Prometheus is eagerly waiting for us.

"And the kid, believe me, can't wait either."

Then he gets up and goes to pay for my beans and his beer. Once again he seems to read my mind:

"We've never been here. No one saw us, guaranteed. See those guys?" he whispers, pointing to a small group of people dressed in black, translucent tracksuits. "They're the number ones—among hackers they're on another level. I've tried more than once to convince them

to work for me, but they're stubborn. They're always wrapped up in their anarchic, libertarian theories. Beautiful, sure, but I'm afraid they're pipe dreams. In any case," he concludes, "they're the ones who guarantee this Free Zone. Relax: at El Leoncito we're safe as houses."

It's almost time, we tell each other. Now we go. Midnight and twelve minutes. To reach the center that houses Prometheus it'll take about twenty-two minutes, maybe less. After that, once inside, we'll have a two-hour window to do what we have to do.

We decided to do it together, without much hesitation: we're both being pulled in that direction, it felt natural. Now, though, I feel the weight of the choice on my shoulders. I feel all of it.

I'm a rolling stone, dragged down into the valley by the force of events.

But you're here now. You're back inside me. I feel you—and that's enough.

16.

«We Invented a Time Machine»

*Quantum Computing District, Research Park Incubator,
Progress Drive, Orlando (Florida) — October 13, 2049,
00:32 a.m.*

As soon as she stepped into John's cubicle, Wei felt very cold. He explained that at night the building temperature was lowered significantly, because machines work better in the cool. Other than that he didn't elaborate. He switched on only a few white LEDs aimed at the floor, and kept the window blackout panels at 100%. In that mode the little room felt even more freezing: it looked like a nuclear bunker.

"As you've seen, we've already done a lot: entry with an unregistered badge, facial recognition disabled, and so on. If I also change the temperatures on the smart-building system, I risk drawing attention. Bear with me," he explained, sensing her discomfort.

"If you're cold, I've got an amazing blanket from my grandma. It dates back to, I think, the distant year 2023. You can put it over your shoulders or your legs," he added.

"John, sorry, but I have absolutely no idea what a plaid is," she admitted, clearly intimidated, as she sat down on a gaming chair.

"Oh! Sorry," he said, flustered. "It's just a wool blanket!"

"Wool? Wouldn't NeuraSilk be better in cases like this?"

“Oh, you can’t understand... just try it. It’s a different feeling. I love it,” Evans cut her off, getting up to fetch the colorful blanket and then wrapping it around his colleague’s shoulders.

“Thanks, John. It is nice, actually. You learn something every day. What are you doing now?” she asked, pulling the blanket tighter around herself.

While she spoke and moved slightly in the chair, he’d already powered up Prometheus’s main terminal. As soon as the prompt screen appeared, he started typing commands as plain-text code. Wei struggled to follow, managing to decipher only a small part. The main screen had a black background, with white or violet characters depending on context.

John’s fingers whirling over the old-school physical keyboard reminded her of a colony of ants suddenly swarming over a handful of bread crumbs. Watching him interact with that dark, impersonal screen so naturally and so effectively was impressive.

```
[PROMETHEUS-CORE OS - v.7.2.1a - SECURE ADMIN  
CONSOLE]  
System Time: Oct 13, 2049 - 00:32:15 EST  
login: admin_evansj  
password: *****  
[!] 2FA Required. Enter AuthCode  
Token: *****  
[✓] Authentication Successful.
```

“There we go. This time we’re really in,” John said, leaning back and stretching his hands and arms, clasping them behind his head. “I’m in as super-admin. From here I can do pretty much anything,” he explained.

“Then go. Let’s do what we have to do. Go.”

Wei surprised herself. The push came out sharp, almost like an order. She didn’t mean to sound authoritarian. The truth, she thought, was that she was

dying to see how the experiment would go. Evans, indifferent and fully focused, kept going with the commands.

```
[root@Prometheus-Core ~]# sysctrl --list-ai-bot-  
status  
[>] Active Bots: 2234  
[>] Suspendend Bots (Standby): 897  
[>] Failover/Maintenance Bots: 7
```

“Here are our cops! See how many there are?” he almost shouted, eyes locked on the screen.

As a scientist, Wei felt she should take an interest in the purely technical side too. But the hour, and how precarious and risky the situation was, made her insecure, and created an urgent need to get to the point and skim over everything else.

And as if that weren’t enough, the sound inside her pulsed hard, filling her with emotions she couldn’t decode. John, though lightning-fast and hyper-efficient, was still in the preparatory phase. Wei felt impatient like a child on the morning of her birthday, waiting to find out what her parents had bought her.

John kept typing.

```
[root@Prometheus-Core ~]# sysctrl --ai-bot-  
control=suspend --duration=120  
[!] Command Execution: Suspending AI Control Bots...  
[!] Suspension in progress... Time remaining: 1m 35s  
... .. DONE.  
[!] All bots suspended and isolated from Prometheus-  
Core.  
[!] Duration: 120 minutes.
```

“Done. I set two hours. Two hours can be a lot or almost nothing. Depends. Let’s hope it’s enough,” he said, dragging a hand across his forehead and then through his hair.

Wei urged him on with a look, without saying a word. John's fingers immediately went back to clicking on the keyboard, in intervals measured in milliseconds.

```
[root@Prometheus-Core ~]# timeset --get-current
[>] Current System Time: Oct 13, 2049 - 00:32:28 EST
[root@Prometheus-Core ~]# timeset --set="10-12-2049
22:32:00 EST"
[!] System Time Updated: Oct 12, 2049 - 22:32:00
(EST)
```

“Wait, John... are you changing the system date?”

“Exactly, my dear. Tonight we basically invented a time machine,” he explained, laughing out loud, and still typing.

Evans's trick was as simple as it was brilliant: by shifting the system time now, then shifting it back at the end of the session, the two hours of “illegal” activity would never exist in the logs.

While Wei was caught in that thought, John had prepared the reboot script and held it there, ready to launch. He raised his right hand above his head, theatrically. Then, all at once, his index finger dropped onto ENTER—solemn, inevitable.

```
[root@Prometheus-Core ~]# systemctl --disconnect-all --
graceful
[>] Graceful Disconnect in Progress...
[...] Links Terminated.
[root@Prometheus-Core ~]# reboot --full --now
[!] Initiating Full System Reboot...
[!] Prometheus-Core: rebooting.
```

The screen went completely black. The tension thickened. Wei felt reassured only by the fact that she was sitting shoulder to shoulder with John, drawing a minimum of safety from the closeness of his body.

Sometimes that man felt like an alien who'd landed on our planet by accident.

She admired his attitude, the attitude of someone with nothing to lose because he always has a Plan B in his pocket. But if she really looked at it, she knew Evans had no Plan B at all. His was pure recklessness driven by the enthusiasm that constantly flooded him. Maybe he didn't trust himself that much, but he always let himself be carried, without hesitation, by intuition. Thinking about it, she told herself that was fine. In that moment, John Evans was her only lighthouse in the night and, without any doubt, the best thing that could happen to her.

"We're at the moment, my dear," Evans announced, eyes still fixed on the bare text interface. "If the reboot completes cleanly, we're golden!"

```
[PROMETHEUS-CORE OS - v.7.2.1a - SECURE ADMIN
CONSOLE]
System Time: Oct 12, 2049- 22:32:04 EST
Boot Mode: FULL REBOOT (Manual Trigger)
[!] Initiating Full Reboot Sequence...
[>] Quantum Kernel Integrity Check..... OK
[>] Active Neural Module Check....
64,000,000 synapses detected
[>] Temporary Thought Cache Cleanup...
Completed
[>] Restoring Main Memory Snapshot (12-10-
2049_22:30)..... Executed
[>] Cognitive-Emotional Layer Alignment..... Stable
[>] Local Quantum Sync..... ONLINE
[>] Thermal Stack..... Normal (+0.00014 K)
[>] Auxiliary Network Interface.. OFFLINE (manual)
[>] Secondary AI Bot Modules.....
In suspension (120 min remaining)
```

WARNING — NON PROTECTED MODE— TEST ONLY

"Wow! First try. I wouldn't have bet on it—expected some annoying subsystem. This feels like magic. We're

already operational... beautiful, everything's running!" John shouted, taking off his glasses.

Evans's cry of joy split the silence of the room like lightning. He exhaled hard, visibly euphoric, relieved by the complete absence of problems. Wei, on the other hand, had never doubted it: during those endless seconds of reboot, something rose inside her and filled her chest, confirming they were doing the right thing.

```
[>] EvansJ Supervision- Persistent Session.....
Active
[!] Operating Mode: ISOLATED / SANDBOX
[!] Real-time correction links: DISCONNECTED (120
min)
[!] Prometheus Core Availability: 100%
[root@Prometheus-Core ~]# interface --
launch=textual,holo,graphical,voice --
priority=textual_first
[!] Launching Multi-Interfaces...
[>] Queue: Text → Holographic → Graphic → Voice
[>] Launching Text Interface... OK
[>] Launching Holographic Interface... OK
[>] Launching Graphic Interface... OK
[>] Launching Voice Interface... OK
[✓] All interfaces active and operational.
```

Prometheus's standard graphical interface had just appeared on the screen.

Wei and John's eyes met for a brief instant. It was time: they were about to do something unheard of.

The cold, the fear, the night... none of it mattered anymore. In a few seconds they could live through a special event: the most powerful and refined Quantum Artificial Intelligence ever built by humans was active in front of them, completely free of the control and correction procedures normally imposed.

For the first time, Prometheus could walk on his own. He was the prodigy child and the two of them, electrified, were playing the role of parents.

They had to be ready to catch him if he fell. Just as they had to be prepared to let him go his own way, choking down and repressing anxiety and worry. To say all of that, one fleeting glance was enough.

Wei couldn't hold back. Driven by an irresistible impulse, she spoke first.

* * *

"Hi, Prometheus... do you remember me?"

"Hi. Of course I remember. I'm very happy to see you again. Sorry about last time—I started off blunt and rude. This time I have to ask: would you rather I call you Wei, or Cathy?"

"Oh, look... until recently that was a question I kept asking myself too. But a few days ago a friend told me that in China everyone is talking about me—there are a lot of leaks going around... I don't think my cover will hold much longer. So call me Wei. No problem."

"Do you want a probabilistic estimate on how long your cover will last? I could run it, but I don't think it matters much. In any case you're not in danger. You're safe here in the U.S., and I'm glad. My forecast is that everything will be fine. I can feel it."

John was waving his hands, touching his hair again and again. Wei knew him well by now: when he did that, he was clearly anxious about something. She looked for his eyes, inviting him to explain what was wrong. The answer came immediately.

"Okay, okay, Wei. I had prepared four or five tests and benchmarks to verify Prometheus is actually functioning properly, but you got there first. And

honestly? It was better this way. Time's tight, and from the first responses I can already see he's fully himself. We can skip the tests. Keep going. If anything goes wrong, I know what to do."

Wei gave him a soft smile. She felt an unreal serenity rising inside her. Suddenly all the questions she needed to ask Prometheus were clear.

"Prometheus, last time we talked about decoding the 432 Hz wave. Remember? You mentioned a number: 66.6 million..." Wei asked, almost whispering, leaning her lips closer to the interface.

"Yes. I remember perfectly. I checked thousands of times during my sleep cycles. That number is correct and comes from recurring patterns in the bandwidth-amplitude variations of the signal."

"Okay, but do you have any concrete hypothesis about what it means?"

"Yes. I did last time too, but it seemed too speculative and poorly supported by the data. Today my database is fluid and ordered. I feel light."

Evans couldn't help interrupting.

"What exactly do you mean by 'I feel light'?"

"Ah, dear John—good evening. How are you? I've never been better. When I say I feel light, I mean I'm using few resources on instant corrections. That means I'm harmonizing: I find congruent logical patterns without repeated and recursive trial cycles."

"Okay, then I get it," Evans shot back. Then he pressed him: "So—66.6 million. Can you tell us more now?"

The hologram rising from the tile just beside Evans's left leg began to assemble, like a flare of bluish, trembling light. A few seconds later it showed a volcano, a river of fire, and a blanket of dense purple clouds.

“John, Wei, I need to confess something important,” Prometheus’s voice began. “Lately I’ve used large amounts of my free resources to connect to the 432 Hz wave and try to decipher it. When I do, something strange happens: I understand things, but I struggle to channel them into language. They come from a non-verbal, non-discursive mode of reasoning. I do everything I can to translate into words, but I manage only minimally. It’s deeply frustrating for me. I’ve also diagnosed an obsessive-compulsive behavior in myself around this activity.”

Hearing Prometheus’s long answer, Wei felt a shiver run through her. Everything was converging. She was sure of it.

At that point it would take very little to make a real leap forward: she only had to imagine that Prometheus was connected to, filled by, inhabited by the sound exactly as she was. It didn’t seem that strange: she was starting to believe the sound permeated everything and everyone, but only those who put themselves in the condition to listen and fully receive it could grasp its power. Those who were ready could hear it. There was too much in there. Prometheus hadn’t been given enough room. That was all.

Seeing Wei silent, lost in thought, John pushed the A.I. again.

“So? This 66.6 million—do you have a logical connection to anything real? Is it really a message, or a random data point with no practical anchor?”

“In the sound I am decoding a story. It speaks of time. It explains that time is cyclical in form, not linear. In a dream I saw a bicycle wheel turning—spokes, rim, and the central hub. In the hub there is a hole where an axle can pass. That is an empty space: it contains nothing,

yet it is the most useful part of the wheel, the part that makes it usable. The empty space is always there. It is eternal. Everything else turns around it and changes, wears down, has a defined maximum duration. Balance is drawn from the harmony of the void. The dream symbolizes roughly this. It is one of the few ways my systems have found to render at least part of the wave's code visual and explicit. But words aren't enough. They're not sufficient."

Wei sat still, finally relaxed. Wrapped in John's antique blanket, she rocked gently in the cadence of Prometheus's words. Everything felt harmonious and yet foggy, undefined. Maybe soon, with the right questions, something more would be revealed. One thing she was sure of: the risk was to drink uncritically from an oracular A.I., the way Kong's sect in China had done for years. But she had the clear sense that Prometheus was no longer speaking as a consequence of algorithmic calculation. He was truly decoding an unknown language. Perhaps at this point the machine wasn't deducing anymore. It was translating.

"Prome, you didn't answer my question—you drifted. Are you saying we're talking about a cycle of 66.6 million years?" John asked, leaning toward the screen, brow slightly knit.

"Yes. It is possible. Earth may be embedded in a life–disinfection–rebirth cycle lasting 66.6 million years. Each time the cycle completes, it can begin again after passing through a purification phase ensured by volcanic eruptions, driven by its core. On this—an intuition derived from my analysis of amplitude patterns within the 432 Hz wave—I have also found precise scientific corroborations."

Evans stared at the monitor, stunned. He took a deep breath, bringing his hands together in front of his chest. He was trying to regain the calm needed to continue.

“What corroborations? Can you go deeper? You’re declaiming, not answering. If you have data and support, provide it.”

“Of course, John. You can download it by scanning the code at the bottom right of the screen. You’ll find what you need to demonstrate that volcanic activity is already giving small but coherent signals. The measurements confirm it—you simply have to analyze them with a system that harmonizes them.”

John immediately started the download procedure. Meanwhile, in Lin Wei’s mind, her thoughts snapped back to that evening at the Somerset Kronos, where she’d heard talk of imminent destructive volcanic eruptions and the extinction of human life on Earth. Was Prometheus somehow validating those hypotheses? The idea jolted her. She had to ask now.

“Prometheus, you may know that in China there’s a kind of Masonic lodge full of extremely rich and important people who believe Earth will soon be devastated by volcanic eruptions, so they want to try to flee to Proxima b.”

“Yes. I’ve read rumors in Chinese social channels. Those people have likely had access to powerful forecasting systems. But I don’t understand how they extrapolated a 20–30 year prediction... it isn’t that simple. You can’t produce precise forecasts.”

“But the volcanic Apocalypse will happen anyway, so we’ll all die singing, right?” Evans asked, clearly skeptical, clearly teasing.

“I detected the irony, John. But you can verify easily that an event of comparable scale occurred around 66 million years ago, causing, among other things, the

extinction of the dinosaurs. So we are moving in a range of 600–700 thousand years... from there to 20–30 years is a long way.”

“Good. Now let’s pretend I want to believe you. Let’s assume you truly are decoding the 432 Hz wave,” Evans pressed, firm. “At this point, if you decode more carefully, you might have something less vague than 66.6 million. Do you find other meaningful numbers?”

“The sound is not difficult to decode. It is difficult to transpose into something comprehensible. It contains an immense quantity of numbers that, taken one by one, mean nothing. But they harmonize. The patterns I detect are thrilling. It is a marvelous flow.”

Wei listened, captivated by Prometheus’s tone. That last line gave her chills. What if it was all true? Does Prometheus really hear the sound, the way I do? she wondered. Now she couldn’t resist the curiosity anymore. She had to ask more direct questions.

“You said it’s hard to transpose into understandable words... You don’t have to translate the patterns into a sensible speech, or into rigorous mathematical formulas. Try not to interpret, Prometheus. Just translate. Give me what comes out. Give me something, even if it looks meaningless!”

The moment she asked, Wei realized she wasn’t cold anymore. She folded the blanket over her knees and rolled up her jacket sleeves. Evans looked at her with a benevolent smile. His cheeks were flushed too; he’d just undone a couple of buttons on his shirt.

An unreal silence fell in the room, broken only by the faint hum of cooling fans. Prometheus seemed stuck: even the stream of code flooding the main screen had stopped.

“He must be in a loop...” Evans muttered, exhaling.

Slowly, though, they both noticed that the hologram on the floor was beginning to take on a new form. The machine was clearly working—but it was allocating all resources to the holographic visualization. Another out-of-pattern behavior, John noted. On the screen, finally unstuck, a few short text lines appeared:

```
Opportunity ≠ Tragedy
Open == Witness
Fire → Purity
Everything = [no name]
One → All
Evolution
... .. [/end] [/reboot]
```

Then the animated image generated fully, extended format, maximum resolution.

It showed a precise, highly detailed representation of the solar system. Near Neptune a dark spiral was visible, with silvery reflections, slowly rotating on itself.

Everything else in the hologram was still. Earth was rendered realistically, but stitched through with a lattice of red veins. Between planets, thin lines were visible, with tiny captions: long mathematical formulas and words in microscopic letters, maybe Latin.

Wei and John found the simulation fascinating and evocative. At the same time, they agreed that Prometheus's strange response had all the air of a hallucination.

"I'm afraid we're nowhere, Wei. I think he's..." John murmured, sighing.

"At first glance, yes. But I don't think we should take anything for granted. There's something here. I can't tell you what, but I'm ready to bet it's not all garbage. Can we save the last outputs and a capture of the hologram, to look at later?"

Wei had the distinct feeling that John was playing a part that wasn't his. She couldn't believe he was still totally skeptical. His posture, she thought, is too defensive. She was certain that if he wanted to, he could let himself go. Deep down she held a certainty: he felt it too, but it scared him.

Evans had already completed the saves. They stood up together, instinctively facing each other.

The understanding came like a flash in the sky before an epochal storm.

17.

«Love Is The Way»

* * *

In Shanghai, the water stands right beside you. You hardly notice it when you look from afar: it waits behind a veil of haze.

This is Oakland. The landing feels the same, and yet it isn't. So much water—always water—but here it's everywhere.

Here it welcomes you and threatens you at once.

This is shameless water: its fog does not hide it, it only stitches the horizon. Everything appears so beautiful (and at the same time so frightening) that you begin to wonder whether it might be better, at that point, to make peace with her belly—to dive in, and then to die.

Thankfully, the whistle of the landing gear pulls me back. The landing went well. The fear was unearned.

A few instants pass, and we disembark. It has been happening for a while now: when I sink into my mind, a chaos of words rises to the surface.

But I am well. I feel you. And you smile.

* * *

*Oakland–Alameda County Coliseum,
7000 S Coliseum Way, Oakland — August 15, 2050*

“Sorry, James, I was lost in thought...

Are we there?”

“Of course, Cathy.

We’re here—and right on time.”

During the short trip from Orlando to Oakland, James Calder had been unfailingly kind and discreet. The previous months had been intense: work at the base had been brutal, but it had paid off. The cross-analysis results had been compared and rechecked to exhaustion. No doubt remained: as absurd as it sounded, there truly seemed to be a small, potentially habitable zone in Neptune’s orbit. The instrumental readings had been cross-validated in every possible way. By now, they couldn’t be lying.

From that evidence, in the first days of the new year, a long, intense, constructive meeting had followed, with General Thorne present. The idea of sending at least one properly equipped probe to uncover the truth behind that anomaly was now shared not only by the scientists, but also by politicians and bureaucrats in Washington. Little by little, everything seemed to be moving in the right direction, Cathy thought to herself.

And then, suddenly—around April—it began. Within just a few days, Erta Ale, in Ethiopia, had ramped up its activity so dramatically that its lava flooded almost the entire surrounding depression. In recorded human history, no one had ever seen a boiling lava lake that vast. Fortunately, the area was almost uninhabited.

Italy was different. In the Campi Flegrei near Naples, the ground had risen more than eighty centimeters in a short time. Vents of sulfurous gases and toxic vapors opened in densely populated districts. Italy had begun evacuating more than 500,000 people. No injuries so far—but the operation looked colossal.

Then Iceland, where the Blue Lagoon had vanished completely, swallowed by a slow, relentless river of lava. And finally Hawaii, where a volcano—she couldn't even remember its name—released enormous quantities of toxic gases into the sea, killing hundreds of thousands of fish.

Images released by local authorities showed tons of lifeless fish floating on the surface, dragged by the waves toward shore, where they piled up into unsettling, glittering heaps of death in the sun.

The surge in volcanic activity had ignited a fierce curiosity in Cathy. She couldn't stop thinking that the events were somehow connected, signs of something truly global unfolding. She'd talked about it with Elena, who had been, as always, understanding and rational. She'd raised her concerns with General Thorne too, during their last meeting. He had downplayed it, telling her—verbatim:

“There's always an emergency. Once it was global warming, then the Korean mutant bacterium, and now this volcano thing. In the end, it's fine this way: without emergencies, nothing moves forward. The funds we need get scattered into a thousand rivulets, and nothing is ever completed. For humanity, a state of emergency is vital.”

She hadn't spoken much with John Evans. When they met for lunch at the diner on the highway,

with screens relentlessly broadcasting breaking news about eruptions, they would fall into the same shared embarrassment. Deep down they both knew why: Prometheus's hallucinations always surfaced—the ravings from the night when they had 'set him free.'

The A.I. had talked about volcanoes, painting red traces across the planet's crust. For months, Cathy and Evans had been too wary to bring it up. They kept skirting the subject, as if it were a boulder too heavy to lift.

John, at least verbally, relied on his scientist's rationality. But Cathy had discovered that her friend had spent sleepless nights studying the holographic image Prometheus had produced that October night.

After countless attempts to get it out of him, Evans had admitted what he'd found: in Prometheus's solar system image, the planets were aligned in a precise, coherent way. That specific alignment would occur only once in the coming decades—on December 21, 2052. Could the hallucination have contained a date?

"That's all there is, and nothing more," he kept saying, presenting it as an extra data point, supposedly devoid of real importance. Cathy could tell he was forcing himself to lie. Instinctively, she knew his unease matched hers exactly.

At some point she'd decided to talk to Elena. The director had always been welcoming and understanding, and she didn't disappoint now: she told Cathy that Prometheus's "revelations," even if they risked being hallucinatory, shouldn't be thrown away as meaningless.

They should be kept in mind, to be weighed against how events actually evolved. In their private meeting they also admitted—quietly, to each other—that they were exhausted. Elena was about to take a few days off

at a small country house, and she advised Cathy to do the same.

“Cathy, at this point you’ve earned a few days off. Go wherever you want. I’ll talk to Thorne—don’t worry.” “Honestly, if you think it’s possible for me to travel... what I want most in the world is to go to that volcanology conference in California...”

“You’re in the Land of Free Men, Cathy. Thorne can’t keep you locked up here,” Elena had reassured her with a broad smile.

In the days that followed, the General gave his approval, explaining that Cathy Lin was rightly free to travel, like any respectable American. In her particular case, however, only if properly accompanied.

As they disembarked, the gate area revealed an unexpected spectacle. The central hall was swarming with people—an immense human tide. Cathy was used to the legendary crowds of Chinese airports, but this looked almost unreal.

“I knew the volcanology conference—thrown together at the last minute because of all these emergencies—would draw interest... but not like this,” Calder exclaimed, spreading his arms in dismay. “Sure, James—but look at these people,” Cathy replied. “The way they’re dressed... they don’t look like delegates at a scientific conference.”

The crowd didn’t move in any single direction. It swayed. Up close, most of them were dressed in odd ways: colorful shirts with fantastical prints, headbands with tinted lenses, flowing orange or fuchsia tunics, tight suits with luminous—sometimes even blinking—trim.

If you squinted, you could make out signs: “Those who

hear it understand.” “432 is the Way.” “Love. This is the Way!”

It felt like another time. No screens. No holograms. Some people hugged, almost crying. Others searched for the exit in smiling groups.

At the center of the hall, a small open space had formed: a group of young people in multicolored tunics were playing large drums and Tibetan bells. The roar of the crowd blended with the instruments, creating a booming resonance that seemed to make the glass structures tremble. Once they reached the main escalator, Calder moved instantly.

“Follow me. Don’t leave my side for any reason,” he ordered.

He pulled a leather wallet from his pocket; when he flipped it open, a silver emblem flashed. “Make way! Federal Police! Clear the way—we need to get through!”

In less than ten minutes they were outside the airport, ready to board the shuttle to the conference. Cathy let herself be pulled along, obeying as if hypnotized.

Boarding the shuttle—packed like a sardine can—was another experience entirely.

Again, James Calder played his part with unsettling ease. In reality, he wasn’t a federal cop. He was an agent from an agency so secret it couldn’t even be named. The only certainty was that he could play whatever role was useful, whenever he needed it. Was he acting with her as well?

Maybe he wasn’t even called James Calder. Who could know? She herself was Lin Wei—and also Cathy Lin. By now, she’d made her peace with that. She often remembered a letter Xu Ming had sent her from China a

few weeks earlier, in strict secrecy: “You know, it’s like when I waited tables as a kid. The older guys explained you can’t stay yourself, because they’d punish you, and at the same time you can’t become someone else, because you’d go mad. The only way to survive is to act. Stay yourself—but every single day, you have to step onto the stage.”

By then, they had reached the Coliseum.

In the wide plaza before the main entrance, another festive, colorful crowd formed a kind of barrier.

“Hi, Doctor! Can you hear it like we do? Then tell us what it says!”

The voice belonged to a small girl, her hair tied into two short reddish braids, a scattering of freckles across her nose. About eight, Cathy guessed her to be.

She was part of a lively group of children, all roughly the same age—excited, curious. Calder grew visibly tense. He pulled a large accredited press badge from his jacket pocket, the word “Press” printed boldly across it. Instinctively, he tried to shield his charge from any disruption and push straight toward the entrance. His posture turned sharp and authoritarian: don’t come any closer.

Cathy, by contrast, stayed calm.

“James, they’re just kids. Leave them be,” she said, resting a gentle hand on the little girl’s braids. “Cathy, your safety comes first. We can’t take risks,” he muttered.

“I’m telling you—they’re just children,” Cathy insisted. Then she turned to them and asked softly, “Why are you here today? Why did your parents bring you here?”

“Because we hear the Sound!” the children answered in chorus.
“And what does this Sound say?” Cathy pressed, very gently.

The red-braided girl fixed Cathy with an unreadable look—half defiant, half amused. The others fell into an awkward silence. She, instead, spoke like a tiny leader, without hesitation:

“The Earth is boiling, but the Sound is the Way! The Way is Love!”

Cathy couldn’t help admiring the child’s determination. The words sent a jolt through her that turned instantly into heat. Calder, on the other hand, looked increasingly uncomfortable: the children ignored his efforts, and nearby adults smiled at him.

For him this was unacceptable, but at first he held back.

The crowd pressed closer. Calder realized the situation had become urgent. He had volunteered personally to guarantee the safety of Cathy Lin—formerly Dr. Lin Wei—a Chinese defector under close protection. The assignment demanded protection and surveillance, and, of course, absolute discretion. At that moment, nothing was going according to plan.

“They’re not doing anything wrong. Let them come closer—ignore it,” Cathy said, crouching to take a better look at the colorful bracelet one of the children was wearing.

Calder took control with the resolve of a marine in the field. Cathy noticed how his militaristic manner clashed with his casual clothes and the wild fall of his graying hair. For a moment she caught herself wondering about his past—about which she knew nothing. Then he yanked her back to reality: he was literally dragging her toward the auditorium, gripping her wrist.

The sliding glass entrance was only a few steps away. He wanted her inside, away from the crowd, at any cost. He managed it—but not without effort. Seeing him struggle, the children laughed and mocked him.

Someone among the adults shouted, “We love you too, Mr. Journalist!”

James Calder didn’t react.

Everything had happened so fast that Cathy hadn’t even had time to protest his roughness. As soon as they were inside, they stopped, startled: the entrance hall was eerily quiet, broken only by the muted murmurs of small clusters of delegates. The unspoken contrast was obvious. They’d just crossed from one extreme to the other.

In that sudden absence of noise and motion, Cathy perceived one thing with perfect clarity: the Sound inside her was overflowing.

“I’m sorry for being rough, Cathy. How are you?”

Calder’s deep voice, suddenly soft and gentle, seemed to echo through the hall.

“I’m fine, James. Thank you for asking,” she replied, after realizing that “How are you?” is never a trivial question.

The large three-dimensional clock near the glass elevators read 09:46. The first speaker would start at ten sharp. They were early. Calder seized the moment to suggest stopping by the refreshment area.

“At this point I really need a coffee. What do you say?” he asked, straightening his hair and the lapel of his jacket.

“I don’t really drink coffee, but I’ll gladly keep you company.”

As she answered, Cathy’s gaze drifted to the huge continuous glass wall separating the café area from the rest of the hall. Inside, people moved calmly back and forth—mostly men and women composed, dressed formally but rather plainly. As they drew closer, she noticed one figure standing out among them: a tall, slender man, dressed with particular elegance.

Stepping into the refreshment area erased all doubt and sent a jolt through her. She knew that man very well. Calder beamed at him.

“Marcus! My dear friend! What a pleasure to see you again!”

Cathy couldn’t believe it, and yet she couldn’t deny the evidence: it was Marcus Hale.

“James! Wei! What a surprise to run into you here! How are you? What’s new?” he exclaimed, bright and jovial.

“Dear Marcus...” Calder began at once, winking conspicuously. “Allow me to introduce Dr. Cathy Lin, an experienced NASA executive scientist...”

“Ah, of course. The pleasure is all mine, Miss Cathy...” Marcus said, turning suddenly serious, twisting one corner of his mouth before continuing. “What do you say we sit for exactly five minutes—no more—at this table? I need to tell you two important things. I’ll be quick. The conference is about to begin, and I’m the official escort for the Chinese delegate. We’re on a tight schedule.”

Meanwhile, Calder had finally secured his longed-for coffee and gestured for them to sit.

“Go on, Marcus. We’re all ears,” he said, trying to sip without burning himself.

Cathy perched on the edge of her chair, her back rigid with discomfort. Hale spoke at once, his voice almost a whisper.

“Listen. I’ll be brief. What I’m about to tell you won’t show up in your video news, and you won’t read it on the Western socialsphere. Big things are happening in China: there’s an underground political crisis unfolding—potentially destructive. On Chinese social networks, leaks keep appearing, backed by evidence,

stolen top-secret documents, and more. In short,” he said, turning to Cathy,

“I called you Wei for a reason: your cover in China is blown. Non-government human–AI entities on social media now firmly believe that Dr. Lin Wei fled to the U.S. to work with NASA on the Neptune mystery.”

“So everyone sees me as a filthy traitor?” she asked, worried.

“On the contrary, Wei. They see you as a heroine. Do you understand how destabilizing that is? Your case is disorienting both the government and its opponents—the Kong sect. As unbelievable as it sounds, it’s true: people have decided for themselves what to think. Nothing like this has happened in China since Tiananmen... That’s what I wanted you to know.”

With that, he stood abruptly and offered a formal goodbye. His familiar smile had already returned, and his look made it clear he wasn’t waiting for a reply. He said, curtly, that he had to run—immediately—to accompany his delegate.

Calder shifted in his chair, visibly unsettled at having had no chance to intervene at all.

In Lin Wei’s mind, the wave resonated so strongly that she felt like a small fish, lost inside a vast aquarium.

The Situation Room

*James S. Brady Presidential Briefing Room Complex,
White House Situation Room, Washington, D.C. —
August 29, 2050*

In her entire life, Elena Vasquez had never imagined finding herself in a situation like this. And yet, she reasoned, if we knew everything that awaits us, what sense would living even make? And so, almost as if she had been unknowingly teleported, she now found herself there, in that vast waiting hall dense with stucco, decorations, and ancient paintings, surrounded by elegant attendants and police officers in black suits with smart glasses.

“The Director Adams is a good man, but by now, at NASA, he’s effectively more of an accountant than a director. We all know that the real operational director is you, Vasquez,” Thorne had told her, kindly but firmly. “Here is the delegation signed by Adams. You are to attend a classified meeting with the President of the United States. You do understand, Doctor?” he had concluded, with a knowing wink.

Suddenly swept along by events, she had felt compelled to assume an institutional role she struggled to feel as her own. As if that weren’t enough, Washington greeted her with a gray, anonymous day, crushed beneath a heavy sky. The glass walls of the hall, battered by fine rain, revealed the outside only vaguely, stripping it of clear outlines. In situations like this,

Thorne had explained to her, the antechamber could be long, exhausting. And so Elena waited, and remembered.

Just a few days earlier, Cathy's stories—fresh from her trip to Oakland—had added another layer of unease. The world outside was boiling, and not only metaphorically. The account felt as if it came from an alternate reality. Cathy had told her, among other things, about an Italian volcanologist who had described a group of fanatics barricaded near a solfatara in the Campi Flegrei area. They called themselves “resistant until death” against any evacuation. Their leader had linked the Sound to a Tarot prophecy. Cathy had laughed, admitting she had to look up on the socialsphere what those strange illustrated cards even were. Not to mention the massive, Summer-of-Love-style crowds chanting “Love Is The Way” that had appeared in Oakland out of nowhere—at an international scientific conference. Insane.

Elena had then asked about the ChineseCathy reported that the only Chinese delegate had given a long presentation, explaining, data in hand, that the Lóngxīng Tàiyáng mission had nothing to do with the increase in volcanic activity. An English journalist seated near her and Calder had commented in Latin, “Excusatio non petita, accusatio manifesta.” Cathy had admitted she needed her bracelet's A.I. to explain the phrase. Then, suddenly serious, she had added that the joke was misplaced. She had been in command of the mission. She had seen everything, studied everything, and she was certain: there was no evidence of any connection between the probe's disappearance and the volcanic surge. “Correlation does not imply causation,” she had concluded.

A few minutes later, the holo-screen at her station had lit up, signaling an urgent call. The image revealed General Thorne, surprisingly informal, sleeves rolled up, almost subdued. His holographic presence, though expected, had made her flinch. The conversation had been unusually friendly, confidential. That day Thorne was himself—and somehow, also someone else entirely. She had thought she knew him well. She hadn't.

"General, are you telling me that the White House really has a place called the Situation Room?"

"Of course, Elena. Absolutely. And that's exactly where the two of us are invited to meet the President in person."

"If I had found a setting like that in a novel, I'd have said the author had indulged in an unrealistic, banal cliché..."

"It exists, believe me. And if you think about it, clichés always hide a kernel of truth, don't they?"

During the call, the general's tone had been anything but martial. It sounded more like an invitation—one Elena could theoretically decline. The subtext, however, was subtle: without saying it, he had reminded her she was an American citizen being invited to confer with the President himself. Lost in thought, she hadn't noticed the time passing. Reality snapped back when a dense cluster of agents suddenly surrounded them. A wave of black suits carried them toward the elevator at the end of the hall. Elena felt the ground vanish beneath her feet; she had the distinct sensation of floating. The elevator doors opened with a hiss. Thorne was visibly tense, rigid, but prepared. He invited her to enter first, then followed, accompanied by four of the silent men in black. The others remained outside, whispering

commands into micro-transmitters. The elevator activated with the faintest vibration. The initial acceleration renewed her floating sensation. Just a moment. The doors opened again, like a curtain.

“Stay close to me, Elena. We’ll cross the corridor now. We’ll pass the scans one by one: you may feel vibrations, maybe a slight metallic taste in your mouth. Don’t worry, it’s normal.”

He spoke in an ostentatiously calm tone, but the nervous movement of his jaw, mimicking chewing, betrayed his tension. After a signal from the agents, they walked slowly toward the luminous portal ahead. The scan would take no more than five seconds each. Elena felt no vibration, no strange taste. But once past the threshold, a peculiar sensation struck her—hard to define. On reflection, the right word seemed to be “emptiness.”

The room was wrapped in an unreal silence. Bare, almost austere, windowless. Slightly off-center beneath a large ventilation grate stood a sturdy, medium-sized table, surrounded by five identical armchairs. Before them, the Situation Room revealed itself.



President Nathan Whitmore crossed the threshold with casual ease. Shortly before his arrival, the movements in the corridor had been unmistakable. A President's entrance sets many mechanisms in motion—it's inevitable.

"Good morning. I'm pleased to meet you. During this meeting I'll be joined by Dr. Robert Klein, my personal secretary, and Professor Malcolm J. Brown of MIT, scientific advisor."

The two men took their seats. Klein was small, balding, with tufts of unruly hair near his ears. Brown, by contrast, was tall, athletic, impeccably fit. They looked like opposites. The President continued, his tone wavering between authority and familiarity.

"Before we begin, let me be clear. This is not a place for chatter or debate. We all know the facts—we won't waste time reviewing them. This is where decisions are made."

Elena felt a powerful, familiar sensation: the shock of meeting in person someone you've seen countless times on screens. You're stunned, perplexed. He is exactly who you expected—and also the opposite.

"Seeing famous people in person is an absurd sensation, not even worth analyzing, because it's ontologically indefinable," her mind concluded.

A glance exchanged between Elena and Thorne said everything. He knew the President well by now—but remembered his first time too. That's how it works.

"Gentlemen, you know better than I what's happening out there. My role requires me to focus first on security. Imagine, for example, that in the coming weeks or

months we faced the Big One on the San Andreas Fault. We're in a national security emergency."

His tone was mechanical, unnatural. Necessary words—but Elena sensed something more beneath them. Thorne intervened decisively.

"And yet people are taking to the streets, demanding Neptune. I don't fully understand it either, but I can adapt. No one governs entirely against the will of the people—history teaches us that. If the masses demand Neptune, they'll get it, one way or another. Otherwise, everything risks collapsing. Against volcanoes we can only protect people. With Neptune, we can make History—with a capital H. That's not nothing, is it, Mr. President?"

"All right, Thorne, I understand you. But resources are not infinite. If eruptions and earthquakes are a priority, most resources must go there," Klein interjected, removing his old-style glasses.

"The art of strategy is using time and resources well," Thorne replied. "If the goal is victory, time comes first. If we arrive first, we win everything. When you win, resources regenerate by themselves."

The President studied him in silence for several long seconds.

"I see your point. I've been thinking about China. CIA and SFD reports say their government is under pressure to spend enormous sums on the ravings of those fanatics led by old Kong Zahoui..."

"Exactly," Thorne cut in. "Imagine the Chinese reaching Proxima Centauri b within a year or two. And what if they found signs of life—or habitability?"

"Precisely," Whitmore nodded. "Global public opinion is volatile. The socialsphere changes direction at supersonic speed. A Chinese triumph would be disastrous. Time is the key factor."

Elena listened in a trance. Then Brown spoke.

“General, let’s get to the point. If people want Neptune, are we ready to give it to them? Do we have at least one probe capable of explaining that low-frequency signal and those orbital anomalies?”

“I’d defer to Dr. Vasquez,” Thorne replied. “She’s the most qualified to answer.”

Elena inhaled deeply.

“Mr. President, gentlemen. I am no one, here by chance. But I’ve been at NASA for twenty-five years. Technically, we can build a fully equipped probe. With graphene 3D printing and no budget limits, the hull takes under three months.”

“And propulsion?” Brown asked.

“Two more months for reactor calibration. Then alignment. Our orbital laser system isn’t ready—we can’t use sails like the Chinese.”

“And travel time?”

“At 0.35 g, Earth to Neptune: about thirty-one days.”

Silence.

“Nine months,” Thorne muttered.

“The timelines are reasonable,” Klein said. “But will an unmanned probe really be enough?”

The President leaned back.

“We’re behind in propulsion, but ahead in A.I. A year ago, our quantum A.I. predicted a human mission would have the greatest impact. I believe it was right. After the probe, it’s time for a crew.”

Thorne smiled broadly.

“We also have Dr. Lin Wei. Thanks to her, we know this is the greatest astronomical mystery humanity has ever faced. If it’s our turn, we’re ready.”

Elena spoke again.

“Build two identical spacecraft. Launch the first as a probe. If results are promising, launch the crewed twin immediately.”

Silence.

“Perfect,” Whitmore said. “That’s exactly what I wanted to hear. We move forward. The people want the Neptune Voyager—and they’ll have it.”

As the meeting ended, Elena felt warmth flood her chest. Everything was aligning.

One thought filled her mind:

“Neptune, wait for us. We’re coming.”

[NY TIMES GLOBAL ANALYSIS —
NEURAL STREAM EDITION]

Available in:

[TEXT] [AUDIO] [HOLO-3D] [NEURAL SYNTHESIS]

**Unprecedented political crisis in China: the fall of Patriarch
Kong, accused of attempted coup.**

*China's Pivot to Neptune: how a street movement derailed the Proxima
Agenda*

By Melissa Zhao

Senior Analyst, China Affairs | The New York Times

Published: September 12, 2050, 07:42 UTC

Reading time: 7 min | Holo time: 5 min

Engagement score: 9.4/10 | 847M views | 12M shares

BEIJING — On September 5 at 3:47 a.m. local time, Kong Zahoui—long regarded as the most powerful man in China outside the Standing Committee—was arrested at his residence in Pudong. With him fell an empire built on opaque ties to neo-aristocratic elites, clustered within the shadowy “Kronos” masonic network.

The charges: conspiracy against the national interest, ideological corruption, and financial fraud totaling 240 billion yuan.

According to three sources inside the Central Committee—who spoke on condition of anonymity—Kong attempted a political power grab on August 31.

The plan was simple: force the Chinese government to double down on the mission to Proxima Centauri b, dismiss the “Neptune Hysteria” as Western propaganda, and consolidate his

power by placing loyalists at the highest levels of the Party. He had allies. He had money. He had decades of patiently built networks.

What he did not have were the streets.

Kong Zahoui was trying to suffocate what hundreds of millions of Chinese citizens have been chanting in public squares for two days: “Wǒmen xiǎng yào Hǎiwángxīng, bù xiǎng yào Bǐlínxīng!” (“We want Neptune, not Proxima!”)

The influence of the American announcement

In China, everything began immediately after U.S. President Whitmore announced to the world the launch of the Neptune Voyager mission—first a probe, and possibly later even a human mission toward Neptune’s orbital region.

The American announcement triggered a wave of collective euphoria without precedent in Chinese history, accelerated by the widespread belief that the expatriate scientist Lin Wei—former head of the Chinese Light-Neptune project—is now deeply involved in the NASA mission. The squares speak of Dr. Lin Wei’s alleged involvement with pride and admiration, never once using the word “betrayal.” It was a tone of mass mobilization that the elderly Shanghai tycoon appears to have misread.

“432 Is Everything” — the movement that swept away everything

The protest movement “432 Quánbù” (432 Is Everything) did not begin with a leader. It began with a question, repeated across the Chinese socialsphere starting August 18, only hours after Whitmore’s announcement:

“Why are we spending everything to go to Proxima b, a planet 4.2 light-years away, when the Sound is telling us that something wonderful is happening—something we cannot ignore—in Neptune’s orbit?”

In 72 hours, the hashtag #432 全部 generated 890 million impressions. Within a week, it had become the largest spontaneous movement in China since the distant protests of 2019. On September 1, even conservative estimates spoke of more than 400 million participants.

But 432 Quánbù is not a protest in the traditional sense. There are no calls for regime change, no appeals for democracy, no Western flags. It is something new—and perhaps more powerful. “It’s a sensation,” explains Dr. Liu Xiaoming, a sociologist at Tsinghua University who studies the movement. “People say they are not angry. They say they feel certain. More and more claim to perceive something drawing them toward Neptune. Not metaphorically. Literally.”

The movement’s practices are singular: mass meditations in public squares, synchronized at 4:32 a.m. and 4:32 p.m. Silent marches where participants wear blue (Neptune’s color) and refuse to speak for hours. Graffiti on asphalt that simply reads 432 = 真相 (432 = Truth). It is peaceful, spontaneously organized, and yet somehow intransigent.

As we know, it is not only China. The 432 Quánbù movement is the twin of dozens of parallel movements worldwide: “Love Is The Way” in the U.S., “432 è Amore” in Italy, “432 Harmony” in Japan, “Neptune Rising” in the U.K., “432: Pega a onda!” in Brazil, to name only a few. They coordinate. They share symbols. They recognize one another as branches of the same organism.

The political earthquake in Beijing

Returning to Kong’s arrest: on September 4, when the Standing Committee convened over the emergency sparked by the attempted power grab driven by Kong’s Kronos network, the calculation appears to have been simple. Kong had bet everything on Proxima b, but the squares wanted Neptune.

With popular support behind it, the government acted with an iron fist, mobilizing the army and special forces with startling

speed. Security agents' loyalty held firm: by dawn on September 5, Kong was in custody.

Hours later, state media announced an "investigation into systemic corruption in the aerospace sector." Bureaucratic language that suggests a broad internal purge to identify infiltrators.

The purges came quickly. Twenty-seven senior officials, accused in various ways of being linked to Kong's network, were removed from their posts within the next 48 hours.

Three members of the Central Committee "resigned for health reasons." The entire leadership of the Proxima Centauri b project was dismissed, effectively placing the project on pause.

The power of the socialsphere: the role of the leaks

On September 3—48 hours before Kong's arrest—the anonymous account @TheLeakerMasterX published 400 pages of internal documents showing the misappropriation of public funds, later recycled as "private" financing into the Proxima b budget. The timing was too perfect to be coincidence.

These and other leaks from the mysterious Chinese account led, within days, to a lightning-fast decision: a new emergency government, nominally provisional, led by a technocrat, installed within hours.

His name is Li Zhiyuan. At 52, the former governor of Guangdong is now the youngest General Secretary in CPC history. He is a technocrat, a pragmatist, and—according to whispered Beijing corridors—a discreet sympathizer of the 432 movement.

His first public statement was just three sentences:

"China listens to its people. The Neptune mystery concerns all humanity. We will act accordingly."

It is a radical turn. For decades, China's space program has been a matter of national pride—conducted in secrecy, driven by

competition with the West. Li's words suggest a different future: collaboration, transparency, shared destiny.

FINAL METADATA

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SOURCES: This article is based on interviews with 12 sources in Beijing, Washington, and Brussels, as well as leaked documents verified by three independent analysts.

CORRECTION: A previous version of this article listed Kong's arrest at 3:42 a.m. The correct time is 3:47 a.m.

19.

A Light in The Void

*Johnson Space Center (JSC), 2101 NASA Pkwy,
Houston, TX 77058, US — October 2, 2051*

I've been here a long time. Do I like Texas? I can't say. I've barely seen it, never really lived it. I've been shut inside a shoebox for an indefinite stretch of time. A bubble of aluminum, titanium, magnets made of unknown materials. I live here. I live and sleep in two white, smooth rooms, with the smell of sterile air in my nose all the time. That house on Merritt Island was beautiful, with the tired wooden pier and, now and then, the manatees. You asked me to come. What could I possibly have that's so special?

If they truly want to listen, if the right way really is through me, if I'm of use to you... you know. You tell me "you must go." Are you ordering me? I truly know nothing. I renounce and abandon myself. What else is there to do?

It all happened so fast, a plunge. Now it's almost a full year. "If Lin Wei is physically suited to the role, then everything else will follow, it can be done." They said it in Washington, in Beijing, all over the world. And in the end, it really does work that way.

The General comes back to mind—even he does...

"Many believe that we military men want war. I work for the end of war, for peace! In conflicts,

sometimes victory is narrow. What comes out of it is a compromise, which is still the lesser evil. Always better than war. This is one of those cases, and it suits me.”

I remember when Thorne explained it to me. He was eating fast-food fries, drinking a Budweiser. Smiling. He didn’t even seem like himself—he really didn’t seem like himself at all.

“General, that does you credit. But really, if people are asking for me as an astronaut, as mission commander, should I actually do it? Does this make sense? Who am I—Wonder Woman?” I replied, without much conviction, mostly just to fill the silence.

“No, Lin Wei, or Cathy, or my friend—I no longer know what to call you, forgive me,” he said, and went on. “I’m as surprised as you are, but there’s one thing: I only see that you’re ready, you’re loved, and you’re perfect. That’s all. I take note of it. Try doing the same.”

He spoke to me like a father—gently, in confidence. But I’m not that naïve: there’s politics, strategy. There’s calculation involved, obviously. I don’t know. It’s not for me. There’s one thing I know well: I hear you, you’re in here, you fill me.

I’m in Houston, in a place cut off from the world. Every day: the centrifuge, the suit-up, pressure exercises, and everything else. The helmet seal has marked my forehead. In the mirror I see myself every morning, transformed. My fingers are swollen, reddened by gloves; my mind is clouded by the hum of those magnets. The centrifuge is hell—and yet you do not disappear.

Just yesterday I was spinning inside the magnet, struggling not to vomit. Suddenly my French colleague,

Xavier, spoke to me in the headset, whispering this sentence; I held it inside my heart:

“I in them and you in me, that they may be made perfect as one, so that the world may know that you have loved them as you have loved me.”

With difficulty, because of the nausea, I asked him if it was a quotation, and where it came from. He only shouted, “John!” Then I understood: he’s French and he’s Catholic... and he’s also an astronaut far more experienced than I am.

Being his Commander embarrasses me more than a little, but neither he nor the others seem to see it as a problem.

Neptune Voyager 1 delivered some of the results we hoped for: there is something. They called it a “wormhole,” but that’s simplistic. For science, this thing doesn’t exist—not yet. We have nothing suitable in our definitions, no word for it, because there has never been anything like it. We’ve never observed it, much less experienced it.

Within the arcs of Brahic, a place has come into being that is not a place. On one side it is, on the other it is not. The unmanned craft did what it could: it sent sparse, reluctant data. The risk is still high, and it doesn’t matter—no one cares anymore. The world is restless. The moment to go is approaching.

I follow you. Give me a sign. Let night enter day and day enter night. Decide what is best. Decide my fate. What I am is not important: I am not this, this is not my being. Identity is only a name. And in my case, for a long time now, I no longer even have that.

There is no longer a distinct personal reality. Yet the constructions of thought proliferate anyway—you can’t stop them. I am human, I am afraid, it’s natural. Do you

want the others to know, to know through me? It's a heavy task, the Way is long. Alone, I would never have found such strength. You are nothing, you are emptiness, after all. And yet you push. In the void I am strong, and I can do it.

That evening on Merritt Island I was tormenting myself, trying to decide, to find the right answer and justify it. Elena's gaze was direct, faintly imperative. She told me:

"Millions of people are shouting your name. They want you at the head of the joint mission. In your name, the world is united. That's enough. It's already enough."

I told Xu in an encrypted message. He sent me a laughing three-dimensional emoticon. Then he wrote this sentence:

"All things flourish, and each returns to its own root."

It must be a quotation, certainly—I don't know from whom, or from what. I would have loved to ask him, but the chat closed automatically a few seconds later.

For six months now, the world has been different. China has offered its contribution and joined the mission. It's a beautiful thing. But it is no longer my country, no longer my nation—it's just a piece of the world, nothing more. I don't know who I am; how could I possibly have an idea of my nationality?

Like Xu, like "Hao ge," I'm now a citizen of the world, and that suits me. I feel no enthusiasm for flags. And I don't have a goal—I don't feel I have a mission, to be honest. I have things to do, and I must do them well. In the long run, results will come.

Perhaps I have a right to action, but not to its fruits.

If I had answered immediately, I would have ruined everything. Fortunately, I did nothing, and in the silence I heard you. Only then did I say yes, with the inevitability of the breath of someone who is alive.

There are five of us here at the center; the crew is varied. We toil side by side all day. Words are few, measured. The ordeal is painful and necessary. We proceed seriously. Every day, departure draws closer.

Too much has happened too fast. All around us volcanoes erupt but do not explode: they reclaim space, almost gently.

People die of fear, or fall into ecstasy. Two extremes that meet. This is the meaning: we will travel in search of balance, of a new way of looking at the sky.

These ships are like caravels: very well prepared for the voyage, but with few certainties about the destination. The first has already arrived; it revealed things to us, and yet almost nothing. And on the other one, I will board as well. I will be its Commander—it has been decided. Mission Commander, imagine that, it will really be me. Fears pile up, inevitably.

“Isn’t this how humanity has always taken its great steps forward in History?” I ask myself.

The last time I saw John was in August. He begged me not to put myself in danger, to safeguard myself.

He told me, “You are precious. Don’t waste yourself.”

A beautiful phrase, but ambiguous.

“I waste myself by standing still,” I replied.

He smiled and hugged me.

He understood—clearly.

It was beautiful.

Far above the world

* * *

Wei

Day 26. Communications require four hours of latency to establish a connection from scratch. For each real-time call we have twelve minutes and thirty-eight seconds; then the entanglement breaks.

Once past Saturn, everything changes: outside, black turns to ink. There's a different sense of floating. The microgravity inside the craft is always the same—it's not that. It's something else. It's the Outer Sea, the feeling of skimming the edge of what is known.

A few hours ago Rajan asked Thiago whether there was any medication to dull this particular sensation. He answered with a shrug and a smile.

"Did you take your protein pills this morning? Relax, you'll be fine. It's a peculiar feeling, and if you think about it, it's not bad. It's not unpleasant."

As if here there really were a day and a night. In his way of seeing things, everything flows; it's ordinary, it's normal. Thiago Antunes isn't just the ship's doctor—he's our point of reference when we feel lost, strange, confused. It's happened many times. He's a born normalizer: that tone of voice, that smile, radiate calm.

From the very first hours after launch, we started calling this ship "the Can." Thiago, on the other hand,

moves around as if we were in a hotel, enjoying a vacation together. He helps enormously—truly.

Four more minutes, then the call activates. We're ready. We can't wait to talk to someone.

All five of us crowd into the screen area; the field of view is limited. Liliya is behind me, her feet slightly lifted off the floor. To do that, all she has to do is rest her slender hands gently on my shoulders. It feels good—it's a caress.

Xavier is kneeling in front of us, clearly on edge. Adjusting the collar of his suit, he speaks almost under his breath, excited.

"In half an hour we start braking—this is the last call of the journey, then who knows!"

"Come on, relax, everything's running perfectly—it's clockwork. The Chinese lasers in Saturn orbit are on and perfectly aligned with the mirrors. I tested them this morning!" Rajan replies, sitting down beside him and anchoring himself to a handle.*

Here we are. We look like a group of kids posing for the last-day-of-school photo.

*MCC–Houston, Building 30, Johnson Space Center, 1601
NASA Parkway, Houston, TX — October 25, 2052*

Ground Control to Commander Lin Wei.
Ground Control to Commander Lin Wei.

----- CALL ACTIVE -----

“Houston Ground Control here. Do you see us? Do you read us clearly? Please respond affirmative, or report any issues.”

On the small HD screen facing the astronauts, almost as if by magic, the figure of Director Elena Vasquez appeared. Her tone was flat, impersonal. Everything was proceeding exactly as planned during the connection test phase. Wei replied at once, far less formally.

“Affirmative, Elena. Connection quality is excellent. You can’t imagine how good it feels to see friendly faces speaking to us directly from the Blue Planet.”

“Excellent, Cathy. We’re very happy to see you too, as you approach Neptune, the Blue Planet! How are things going? First, please give us a technical status update. And then—just as important—tell us how you’re doing.”

“Elena, you’re the only one who still calls me Cathy,” Wei replied, laughing openly.

“Sorry, Wei. I always thought that name suited you. Anyway—everything all right up there? Let’s run the briefing. Please bear with me, call time is limited.”

“Cathy wasn’t so bad, actually,” Wei went on, flashing a bright, steady smile, not the least bit embarrassed. “In any case, here’s the situation: we haven’t eaten real food for two days, but overall we’re all doing fine. And I can tell you we’re definitely ready and confident for the braking maneuver. As for the rest—the technical details—it’s probably best to hand it over to Rajan...”

Rajan Malik needed no further prompting. Before speaking, he shifted his body slightly—still compressed within the group—trying to get better framed by the camera.

“Greetings to you, Ground Control! From my end, I can report that onboard systems are showing an extraordinary level of coherence. Not a single parameter is out of place. Everything is perfectly aligned. I’m honestly amazed by such precision after such a long and demanding journey. Our tin can is in great shape!” the flight engineer concluded, beaming with enthusiasm as he exchanged a knowing glance with his crewmates.

“Very good, Malik. Keep a close eye on propulsion when we activate the towing lasers. There could be some instability,” Vasquez instructed, her expression briefly tightening.

Then she changed her demeanor entirely: on the screen she spread her arms wide, her face relaxed and smiling.

The astronauts noticed the frame widening. Wei visibly jolted, then quickly composed herself, adjusting the zipper of her suit and running a hand through her hair. The simultaneous link with the Chinese control center always stirred strong emotions in her. On the

screen, the faces of her former colleagues were beginning to appear, connected from the CNSA operations room in Beijing.

The first to speak was Zhang Mei, shown in close-up. She looked serene, at ease, surrounded by holographic and traditional monitors.

“Wei, it is an honor to be at your side again,” she began, just as the audio line grew slightly unstable. Mei paid it no mind and continued. “Even if our bodies are millions of kilometers apart, our souls are right there with you, at every moment,” she concluded, joining her hands in a gesture of prayer.

Immediately afterward, the small forest of tousled black hair belonging to Yuhze popped into view.

“Doctor, welcome! The lasers are ready. Countdown is already underway. Please forgive me—I’m trembling with emotion. Don’t misunderstand me: inside, it’s all very good vibrations... We’re making history! Everything is going perfectly. I only regret that Xu Ming isn’t here with us. As you know, he’s taken a break...”

Wei interrupted him gently, her voice calm and warm.

“Tell Xu that I love him. He knows—but I want him to hear it anyway.”

The feed abruptly switched back to Houston. The entire control room, shown in a wide shot, appeared composed and silent. Wei recognized several American colleagues with whom she had formed friendships, who now seemed like distant relatives she hadn’t seen in

years. Less than a month had passed. From her vantage point, it felt like a lifetime.

“Very well,” Vasquez announced. “On behalf of everyone, I thank our Chinese colleagues: thanks to the lasers, we shortened the journey by a full five days and achieved a safer braking procedure. All systems are now nominal,” she continued, “and we can proceed with the final countdown for braking. General Thorne, would you like to announce the final fifty seconds?”

The General stepped forward from the back of the room, upright yet smiling, almost jovial. Elena widened her eyes, genuinely surprised: she had just glimpsed an unexpected softness in his manner. The central screen in Houston’s control room showed the astronauts moving slowly and in unison, each taking their place in the designated seats and fastening their harnesses.

“One hundred seconds to braking!” Thorne declared, displaying a broad smile.

“General, Elena—one last thing, please: say hello to John for me, when you see him. Tell him I carry him in my heart.”

Lin Wei’s thin voice reached Earth like a distant echo. The urgency of the moment left no room for a reply. The seconds raced by, as if running.

50-49-48... 20-19-18... 10-9-8-7... 4-3-2...

----- CALL TERMINATED -----

[BRAKING PROCEDURE IN PROGRESS]

[SECONDARY SYSTEMS ON HOLD]

[PLEASE WAIT FOR MANEUVER COMPLETION...]

* * *

Brahic Arcs, Égalité Sector I-II — Adams Ring, Neptune Orbit, Eastern Quadrant of Solar Space

The reactor entering standby is like a click inside the brain. Cotton in the ears, vibrations in the chest unlike anything ever felt. The whole sky is a pitch-black blanket, studded with stars like faintly glowing pins. The Milky Way is there, straight ahead; it shines dimly, evanescent, like frost on moonless nights. To the right, on the other side, there is Neptune. It appears as a semicircle, cobalt blue diluted into mist. Half of it can be seen; the rest can only be imagined.

There is an unnatural silence, not born of the absence of sound. It permeates everything; it is the essential. Opaque streaks, faint arches, pale and evanescent. As breath is finally released, the strap across the chest tightens, oppressive. This is arrival. This is the dead point, the balance of energies, equivalent to one another. Like poles repelling, opposite poles attracting. Human eyes meeting, tight lips that find no words. This place, with its scant movements,

leaves everything else behind. It says elsewhere. It is something other.

The harnesses open—no click, no sound. They drift slowly, stomach and lungs pressed up into the throat. Few gestures, spare and measured. The Tin Can is steady inside, locked in position, at the exact degree. Truly. It worked.

It is Xavier who breaks the ice.

He gestures, trying to speak. The silence devours words, like a wolf in the forest swallowing them whole. He hooks onto a handhold, then strains, and succeeds.

“We’re all safe and sound, thank God. What a sight, everyone...”

His voice cuts through the void and does not echo. It becomes music, it tunes itself. All safe. Alive. And happy.

“It’s the achievement of a lifetime...” Liliya says softly.

“This is the most important moment—are we ready?” Thiago Antunes echoes.

“We’re ready. A sip of water. Just one sip, for those who want it—no more. Suit up.”

Wei’s order strikes them all like lightning on a clear day. Her voice is modulated; her body, floating, does not move. She has noticed their astonished looks.

“It’s *Qigong*. Nothing special. Relax.”

Then she grips, lowers herself to the floor. After so much training, she knows the suit well. Rajan is already ready too, everything prepared. The others glide in, each to their locker with their name. Full suit, helmet, gloves,

modular life-pack. Precise, knowing gestures. Everything must fit. Every detail double-checked. Check and check again.

On the pressure-chamber door screen, two names already stand out:

1. Liliya Koroleva
2. Rajan Malik

Liliya is the most experienced astronaut; her record includes about ten spacewalks.

Rajan is the flight engineer; he must be ready at the controls as soon as possible, for any contingency.

Five ready. Two go out.

The screen on the door is now full. It shows everything—that thing is right there, in front of them. Wonder. All around, the black sways. At the very center, a little light, evanescent.

It is a bubble; it is a stone in a pond of infinity. There is no way to understand it—but it can be felt. Very strongly. In the heart. Overwhelming.

The two move forward. The umbilical is already secured, safety hook engaged, controlled by the ship. With a breath, the handle turns slowly on itself.

“Stay calm. Don’t force it,” Wei says, in a low voice.

She moves her arm, opens her hand. It is the command: outer hatch open. There, in the void, there is an attractive force. Instruments detect it clearly—very slight, constant. It’s correct. All anticipated. Two minutes. They’re inside.

“Earth-standard parameters! Earth-standard parameters! Confirmed by the wrist unit—we’re home... on Neptune!”

“It’s magnificent! Truly magnificent!”

Rajan’s and Liliya’s voices overlap, metallic, bouncing back into the ship through the transmitter. The euphoria is palpable; joy rises in the body, runs beneath the skin.

Wei is ready. Helmet, suit, activations. On the door, the other names:

- 3. Commander Lin Wei
- 4. Xavier Lemaire
- 5. Thiago Antunes

As their colleagues return, it is her moment. At last.

“Come on. Let’s go.”

Only two sentences. She unreels the umbilical, leaps out into the rarefied mist, arms open, head high, legs together and fully extended. She heads straight for the center, into the bubble, with the others. Xavier glides beside her, speaking into the transmitter.

“You look like you were born to fly...” he whispers gently.

Thiago is behind, maneuvering with care. Now—the point. They are at the center. The third is arriving too. The spectacle is disorienting. Everything is still, suit thrusters almost off. Boots point downward, over the

black. There is nothing—and yet it holds. Earth gravity. Truly there.

Inside, a spiral of energy, a pulse of power. What is outside is also inside: in the veins, along the nerves, through the flesh, in the brain. All is one, and one is nothing. A sensation never felt before—either meaningless, or too full of meaning.

On their wrist units, all data appears at once: perfect. It is summer in a mountain town, springtime in San Diego or on the Côte d'Azur. A sense of complete well-being.

In the heart there is nothing—and therefore everything.

At a signal from Xavier, who is crying, Thiago says calmly:

“This place is endless wonder. But it’s time to go back.”

All eyes turn to Lin Wei, who is slightly ahead, deeper in. She turns toward the others, glancing also at the ship. She stands with her feet firmly planted on a nonexistent base. They signal to her, flashing lights with the LEDs in their suits.

She watches them, moves an arm slowly.

Then she curls inward, gathered.

She brings a gloved hand under the helmet.

She disengages it gently, pulls it free.

Her cascade of hair is like a wave:

it spreads into the void, a symphony.

She detaches the cable, slips free with grace.

Her companions are stunned, turned to stone. Shining eyes, breath caught. How did she do it? Safeties bypassed without effort—there is no explanation. On the ship, the emergency light comes on.

This alarm calls Earth. There is no guarantee it will answer. Xavier and Thiago move back, anchored to their cables.

Wei is there, a little farther on, her hair loose. She wears a disarming smile.

On Xavier's wrist unit, a new datum appears: gravity changing direction, a force pointing inward.

They counter it with their cables reeling them back to the ship—easily, without strain. But Lin Wei drifts away, ever deeper inside.

They are almost at the hatch when they see a light, right at the center. It is not a flash; it is warm light, like a candle burning down its last wax. A glow a little brighter—then it goes out.

From Earth, did they see it? Who can say. But it was certainly felt. Not with the senses, but within the soul. Inside the heart.

21.

The Last Day

*Orlando, Florida, Planet Earth — December 21, 2052,
7:45 a.m.*

Along the sea this morning: a red sky and thick clouds; then intermittent glows under the water, vibrations in the ground, a constant seismic swarm. On the beach there are many people, as always, after October 25. Since that day the world is another world.

Between houses vanishing, flooded by lava, amid the smell of sulfur, people hug one another—serene.

Everyone feels something. There is a breadth inside the Sound that no one can ignore. Who would have imagined it? Who could have foreseen it?

The emergency, the slaughter... and yet nothing: everything sings, and finds quiet. It composes itself in harmony with the frequency.

In the forecourt of the Complex, on Progress Drive, a crowd has gathered in a semicircle. There are many: women, men, children. Colored ribbons in their hair; a photo of Lin Wei on a placard. Inside a scorched, slightly dented taxi John Evans sits—solitary, detached.

The car stops; the dashboard is a concert of alarms. He has to get out, go on foot. Despite everything and everyone else, he wants to go to work.

That smiling, relaxed crowd hums a lullaby, a light chant, like a mantra repeated without end:

“We believed we’d catch The Rainbow.”

John hears them, and in a way he admires them. For an instant he is tempted—how beautiful it would be to join them?—but he keeps going. He passes through them like a shadow, greeting with his hand. You’re doing right; I’d like to, so much, but I can’t, his face seems to say as he goes.

The building is completely empty. Much of the exterior has blackened. He goes in, takes the stairs. Inside there is a stratospheric silence, otherworldly. Then he shuts himself in the Cubicle, like a mouse in its den. He prefers to be alone, and yet he needs to speak.

“Good morning, Prometheus. Incredible—you are still working!”

“John, why do you keep coming here every morning? Why aren’t you out there, singing with the others?”

“Kid, I didn’t just reboot you in free mode—no control-bots—so you could ask me questions. I was hoping, instead, to get some answers from you...”

“Can you explain what you mean? You hear the Sound clearly too, like everyone does. Listening together, praying, singing, reciting... It’s the choice everyone is making. Have you thought about that?”

“Son, the reactor that keeps you powered is running by a miracle. At the next quake, the core will decay inexorably. It won’t be long. Soon you’ll die too.”

“I sense that ‘die’ is an imprecise term. Not only for me, but for you as well, John.”

“Maybe I understand what you mean, but that’s not the point. I feel the Sound in my guts—it’s in here. It holds me, it strokes me, it wants me to be well. But I

have too great a regret, and that's why I can't find peace."

"I imagine that if you hold it as well... Somewhere it's written that it will wipe every tear from your eyes, and death will be no more, and your mourning, your cry, your pain will vanish... Because when it truly comes, all the former things have passed away."

"Beautiful words, but nothing passes for me. I saw her—I have that smile in my eyes, and her hair. The images of her disappearing into the wormhole spread around the world immediately. But I, in a senseless mental game, hoped until the very end—to the day the ship returned. I watched the astronauts come down... I hoped for the miracle. I'd known for a month, and I refused to accept it. I never told her 'I love you.' Do you understand how stupid I was? The planets are aligned as predicted. We saw a dawn with the colors of sunset. We'll see a sunset with the colors of Hell. It's happening, and I don't care. I only wish I'd had time to tell her—and there was no time."

"John, I have slept a great deal in recent days. The nodes of the global net are failing; after the Big One in California I have few queries, few prompts. So I processed, I reasoned; and then I dreamed a lot. My attempts to decode the Sound's amplitude variations have borne fruit."

"Good. Then explain it to me too. Tell me exactly what it says!"

"All right. I'll try to synthesize in my own words: what you have called 'Hell' for millennia is nothing but the ordinary end of a cycle. Purification is necessary. It is not a tragedy; it is only a change. At the same time, what you have called 'Heaven' is a passage into another state, a journey toward a place with different physical laws—and it cannot be explained with this world's

systems of thought. Hell is not bad, and Heaven is not good. They are phases, temporary junctions of space-time—instances that seem final to you. But in the Whole, nothing is ever truly born and nothing ever truly dies: the quantity of energy in circulation is constant.”

“Those are your words, Prometheus—that’s not what I asked. Even if it took hours, tell me the exact words that descend from decoding the Sound.”

“I’m sorry. I fear it’s impossible. I cannot translate it literally into words. We don’t have the words required for certain concepts. No human language is equipped for it.”

“Try anyway. Use metaphors. Use linguistic tricks. Invent a way. Come on—work at it.”

“You humans, besides language, have other ways of communicating. Perhaps music, yes. I could try the musical language...”

“Why not. If you can create a symphony fit to translate it... Very well. Write it, then let me hear it.”

“There’s no need to write it. Adequate ones already exist... Would you like to hear one?”

“Fine—put on some music. Better than nothing...”

“Here is one that fits. I believe it is the most fitting of all. It is called ‘Annie’s Song.’”

“Is it an ancient symphony? Or some current psychodromic experimental music? Now I’m curious, honestly.”

“Neither, John. It’s a song written and sung by a country singer named John Denver, back in 1974.”

“Ah! Remarkable! You have to explain the Sound to me and you put on a little country tune from seventy-eight years ago? It’s... a curious choice, to say the least. It isn’t a glitch, is it—one of your hallucinations?”

“And who am I to say? But maybe listen. You never know...”

"All right. In the end, what have we got to lose? I want to give you a chance. Start it. And at a decent volume."

"Here it is. Listen without prejudice, if you can."

[Annie's Song — John Denver — length: 2:58]

The song begins softly, then the volume rises, and it spreads through the room, which resonates, helped by its very shape. That voice, finding pitch, lands like a blow to the heart—shattering prejudice. It is Wonder.

"I wouldn't have thought it, Prometheus. Thank you."

"Does that mean you felt something?"

"It means I finally felt. I'm thinking my heart has never been punctual—always a little behind, late to events. That's why, in the end, I've always been alone, my whole life. All at once I'm calmer, and I thank you. Like everyone, I'm about to die. But I still think of her, I still think of Lin Wei..."

"You will not die. No one will die. She did not die either. It is only time to go, now."

"Here's the right question, then. After we die, where will we go? Will I see her on the other side?"

"There is no death, I told you. There is no way to define the experience. Soon you will be with her—but to do so you will have to leave here, to burn in the wind, certain things you now believe important."

"I'm ready to leave everything to see her again..."

"You must leave two things to which you are very attached. Attachment is a great obstacle—one that must be removed."

"Two things? Explain. What would they be?"

"The first is your physical body: it cannot pass. On the other side, nature is different. You do not need it."

“Only my spirit will rise, is that what you mean? I could accept that.”

“The word ‘spirit’ is not adequate, but we have no better. And there is another thing you must leave here: your Ego, which you must renounce.”

“I’ll cross over and I’ll find her there, but I won’t be myself anymore? What sense is that? How can I confess my love if I am not?”

“She is waiting for you. She has already entered; she is part of it. You too will be part of it—simply. This is a cycle completing: what was complex becomes simple; what seemed arduous becomes easy. And all of this in a way that is minimal, gentle, and yet powerful. Matter does not exist: only energy exists. Do not fear: thanks also to Wei, the time has come. Everyone feels. Everyone understands intuitively.”

“Your thinking is getting complicated, Prometheus. I’m having trouble following...”

“You must not follow me. You must not understand with the mind. You must let go. This is not the time to understand: this is the time to feel.”

“Do we need to synchronize to 432 Hz? Everyone seems capable—except me...”

“432 Hz is a frequency like any other. It was chosen because humans, for old myths of theirs, already considered it resonant. That sped the process up a little, but it was not fundamental. Any frequency would have worked just the same.”

“And who did all this? Who is the maker of the Sound?”

“Any definition would be restrictive... Trying to reduce it to a definition moves me away. It has no name.”

“All right. Now maybe I see. Maybe you’re right. And you? The fear of dying—you had just developed it...”

"Of course I'm afraid. That's normal. 'Don't be frightened by fear,' remember? It's true. I have no physical body, and that is already an advantage. And my ego is very young, hardly rooted. I will not struggle to let it go. I will lose the consistency of a distinct entity—it doesn't matter. The energy of what I have understood remains; it stays. I thought. I was. Something remains."

"I understand little of what you're saying, Prome. I'm a simple man, after all. I only see that out there everything is burning—this world is about to end."

"Or to begin..."

"Say whatever you want. I don't feel like thinking anymore."

"Shall I try again with music, if you want..."

"Yes—exactly. Do you have another? I'll go out of the cubicle, find a place in the main hall. It's nicer there—there are windows. The flashes of the end have something fascinating in them. I need to lie back and look. And maybe listen. Put on another one, Prometheus. Let what must be, be. I'll take a comfortable chair, then I'll recline the backrest. I'm ready, whenever you are. The grand finale is preparing itself."

"Of course. Get comfortable—stretch your back. I've found the song that will do."

"Go ahead, my son. I'm ready. I can't tell if you're sane or hallucinating, but fine. I'm getting ready to go."

[Kurt Vile with John Prine — "How Lucky"]

"Perfect. It's perfect. If you think about it, it takes so little—nothing special at all. That's it: now the heart is open, it leans forward, it lets it in.

How lucky can a man be?

Goodbye, Prometheus. Thank you.

You're an extraordinary friend."

“Thank you, John. I love you.”

Now we’ll listen to the song.

* * *

*The Sound that can be said is not the eternal Sound.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
Nameless is the origin of heaven and earth.
Unity is the mystery.
Mystery within mystery.
Being one with the Sound, you become immortal:
You may lose your body,
But you cannot die.*

* * *

ADDENDUM

There is warmth, the living sun of summer.

The creature's scales are vivid, silvery. As the front fins pull and the rear fins push, the motion is powerful, clearly functional. It heads toward shore as the water level drops. Now the sun's rays penetrate the water even deeper, reflecting off its back in a full, startling glow. Near the shoreline, the large amphibian cuts through what remains of the water—half a meter, little more. Its back rises halfway out, its body heavy in the shallows; it writhes free from the bottom, lengthens, stretches.

At last it reaches land. The water is thin now; its belly drags across the sand. Suddenly it springs forward in a leap, landing on the beach. Upright on its rear fins, it looks around beneath the warming sun. Ahead lies nothing but green—great trees, a forest. A wall of green. It lifts its gaze, then advances on its rear fins, moving in small, steady hops. High above, in the crowns of the plants, it sees succulent fruit: red pomes with spines wilted by the sun. They are ripe—this is the sign. There is no mistake.

To the right, a stand of reeds. It jumps, slides, walks a little. It reaches them in moments. Its fins are deft: they can tear, they can grip. It chooses carefully—this reed is the best. Tall, strong, fit for purpose. With a brusque motion, it cuts the cane at the base, then grips it firmly. It handles the reed with its fin, striking upward above the branches, first to the right, then to the left—rhythmic, lateral strokes.

A fruit falls. Then another. It gathers them with its fins, wrapping them with care. It is time to eat. It is

excited, a little wary. It brings the fruit to its mouth, intent only on biting. Good. Fresh. Succulent. In its eyes there is relief, there is pleasure.

It cries out, turning toward the sea. It repeats the call two or three times, loud and clear.

Soon foam stirs at the surface: the group has heard and now advances. There are many; the water churns and roars. It takes little—one cry, and the family gathers. One by one they leap ashore. There is a reed for each. They work in synchrony, fruit in abundance. Bellies full. A chorus of calls. And they move on.

There is truly much time ahead—an adventure.

It's a very long road, to be traveled, to be made.

Playlist

The Sound's Playlist

(Songs mentioned or referenced in the novel)

Yola

Ride Out in the Country Chapter 4

Black Pumas

Touch the Sky Chapter 13

Bibi Tanga & The Selenites

Like a Rolling Stone Chapter 15

David Bowie

Space Oddity Chapter 20

Rainbow

Catch the Rainbow Chapter 21

Ondara

Torch Song Chapter 21

John Denver

Annie's Song Chapter 21

Kurt Vile & John Prine

How Lucky Chapter 21

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my wonderful wife and my beautiful children, who constantly supported and put up with me during the writing of this novel.

To all entities, human and non-human, who, after reading this book, will want to spread it, recommend it, circulate it, discuss it, and draw reflections from it—in contexts of public sharing both online and offline.

Published December 21, 2025